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THE
UTTERMOST FARTHING.

A Novel.

BY
CECIL GRIFFITH.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

SECOND EDITION.



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THE
UTTERMOST FARTHING.

CHAPTER I.

THE afternoon was dark, with November fog driving inland before a low but steady wind. Work and reading had an hour sooner than usual been laid aside, and May stood idle at the drawing-room window looking out. Through the curling changing waves of vapour the bare arms of the avenue trees seemed shadowy and far off, here and there a glimpse of garden beds betrayed the destruction wrought by autumn gales. From time to time at the nearer end of the long sweep two figures became visible in the early twilight, and then, returning again upon their steps disappeared into the dense white mist. It was

for their periodical reappearance that May stood watching alone in the darkening drawing-room, and upon these two figures, as long as they continued to be distinguishable, her eyes were fixed. By the height of one, the bulk and the uneven tread of the other, she would have known them for her brother and Ragagni, even if she had not seen them go out together an hour ago. And now, observing them as they paced up and down the gravel drive, she experienced a great satisfaction, feeling that she was not alone in the arduous task of shielding Alan from suspicion. By herself in the long quiet room, at liberty to relax the strain upon mind and nerves, without which her old manner could not before others be maintained, and with, as she believed, a proof of Ragagni's friendship before her in that prolonged walking in the wet, May enjoyed as much of comfort as it was now possible for her to enjoy. The motive of Ragagni's more than moderate conduct she did not profess to understand. It might be pity for herself, or it might be the influence of something like her own feeling for Alan, which it always had perplexed her to find so few to share; or it might be that, perceiving in the

punishment of the living no possibility of advantage to the dead, of milder nature than the other mourners for Varese, he was willing to sacrifice his own private revenge, extending pardon and assistance to a criminal who, as May felt assured, had not intentionally sinned.

At last, out of the thick mist, one figure emerged alone. May easily recognised it as Alan's, coming slowly towards the house. A moment afterwards he opened the drawing-room door, and looked in.

'Is Catherine here?'

'I don't know where she is. Alan, aren't you unwise to stay out so long in the wet? Is Signor Ragagni gone home?'

'Just gone,' said Alan.

He came in and sat down. His face scarcely expressed the feelings of one just coming from a forgiving friend and powerful protector. He had an angry expression, and not angry only, but fearing. As May left her station at the window, a little surprised, he raised his head, however, saying in his usual tone,—

'Ragagni does not get on with old Mrs. Roll as well as we did, May, it seems. He finds himself uncomfortable there, and talks of leaving.'

‘What a pity!’ exclaimed May. ‘Will he not be as near us then in future? Where does he mean to go?’

Alan paused for an instant before he replied.

‘For a time, at any rate, I have asked him here.’

It was surely a fresh proof of that confidence in Ragagni which she so earnestly desired her brother to entertain. May was for a moment silent through excess of satisfaction.

‘Nothing could be better,’ she said at last, with an accent of eager relief.

‘He is here half his time as it is,’ continued Alan, ‘so he may just as well be here altogether.’

Then he got up and went away, leaving May, after all, in doubt as to whether the arrangement he proposed was as agreeable to him as it was to her.

In the course of the day he spoke of it to Catherine also, and was answered with undisguised surprise.

‘Why, Alan, you cannot bear my cousin!’

That his aversion had been noticed Alan had had no previous idea, and at present there was greater reason than ever to dread such observation.

‘Nonsense, Catherine! that’s one of your fancies,’ he said, in haste.

‘It is true,’ she contradicted, ‘why should you deny it? No one would expect you to like such a person as my cousin Ragagni.’

A remark which could hardly be flattering to both of those whom it concerned. The tone, discriminating nicely between the two, warned Alan that Catherine’s humour was perverse, and nothing complimentary intended for him. Her words, indeed, expressed the profoundest truth, but the tone was ill chosen for any but an irritating aim.

‘Why not?’ he asked angrily.

‘He is much too old to be your companion, and much too busy.’

‘Too old,—too busy! He’s not busy about anything just now—that you know of,’ he added to himself.

‘Too much the reverse of indolent,’ said Catherine; ‘don’t take offence at that, Alan; I mean he has none of your elegant languid ways.’

‘He has better health than I have,’ said Alan, after an indignant pause. ‘Catherine, how unkind you are! You have always something that you think cutting to say.’

'I have no wish to say anything to you at all,' she answered with a kind of sour calm, and applying herself to the work on which she was engaged in silence scarcely less provoking than her speech. Alan, however, after a space, remembered that Ragagni's coming to Bellair was no matter from which to be diverted by momentary irritation, but must absolutely be arranged at once.

'At all events this supposed dislike is sufficiently disproved,' he said presently, 'by the fact that I have just asked him to come and stay here.'

In her ordinary moods Catherine would have been amiable enough to acquiesce, her cousin being the invited person. But the fresh disappointment arising from the apparent uselessness of Philip's much vaunted discovery had of late increased the bitterness of her temper, and by stirring up fresh regrets for him she was not permitted to avenge, had lessened the tolerance which in place of affection was all she could give to Alan Valery.

'You should have spoken to me first,' she said, adopting an accent of rebuke.

"Spoken to you first!" repeated Alan. 'What should I do that for?'

For a few minutes he experienced a kind of

uneasy irritation that would have made further provocation on Catherine's part more dangerous than she was aware. Fortunately she was content to intimate her displeasure by silence, and he had time to explain away her offensive manner as he chose. Nor was he just then in the humour for absolute passion. He was at heart too dreary, too much oppressed by the prospect of that continual watch which, in accordance with the midnight compact made a little while ago, his assistance was required to establish. This power of Ragagni's was in itself a misery, an irritation in comparison of which all others became small. Besides, save only in his jealous fits, he hated quarrelling with Catherine.

Enough had been said to ensure Ragagni's coming to Bellair. And Alan knew that from his pitiless supervision he would have no freedom for the short remainder of his life. Catherine sat opposite to him, dark and sorrowful. His presence gave her no pleasure, his voice made no music in her ears. That presence for which she longed, that voice that had given her heart delight, he had removed from her side and silenced, vainly imagining that in himself he could provide a substitute. She never looked up at him while he sat there and

watched her. She went on with her work listlessly and yet perseveringly, with so much interest in it, at any rate, as was greater than any she had in him. Thus it was always now. Always the perverse indifference of the old times, without even the capricious return of favour and affection which she had now and then condescended to display.

‘I may as well go,’ Alan said, at last, ‘if you won’t speak to me.’

At that she raised her eyes. ‘You told me I never said anything that was pleasant to hear,’ she said. ‘You never have any sympathy with me, Alan; what should I talk about?’

He did not venture upon any distinct reply. To express a wish for conversation after that beginning would have been to draw upon himself a fresh discourse about her baffled plans; a fresh recital of her disappointment in the matter of the ring. He lingered in the room, however, and after a pause, to his surprise, she began to speak upon another subject.

‘Philip has been complaining to me of May.’

It was so unexpected that he gave a start, and imagining that Philip had been finding fault with what he thought so much too good for him, felt irritated at the same time.

‘Of May!’

‘He thinks she is looking ill.’

This was complaining in a different sense from what Alan had at first supposed. The momentary anger disappeared, compunction rising in its place. Poor little May! No wonder if the shock she had received should leave some outward as well as inward signs of its occurrence.

‘Does he?’

‘I’ve not perceived it,’ said Catherine, indifferently. ‘I believe she is as strong as iron.’

Thereupon Alan said no more, doubtful as, till he had had full time for consideration, he was about everything, lest an appearance of extreme anxiety should arouse too curious investigation into the reason. However, when he saw May again, he watched her narrowly, and as soon as the opportunity could be made, asked if she felt ill?

May had some difficulty in answering. She was not ill, but she was unhappy, and of this he was the cause, as he must know. Yet his manner of questioning showed no consciousness such as she would have expected him to be unable and even unwilling entirely to hide. When once she had departed from her first intention, and his crime and danger had been

freely spoken of between them, it would have seemed to her best that there should never again be any reserve. She thought it unnatural and perplexing that he should endeavour to draw back from the confidence which he had given. And he had drawn back, ever since she told him of her intercession with Ragagni, and the promise she had obtained. Of that after explication of the promise between Alan and Ragagni she knew nothing, and her brother dreaded lest she should be ever made to know. The horror of that strange and awful compact was yet so new to him that he doubted his ability to feign thankful trust, if they should speak of Ragagni, or to listen patiently to May's epithets of praise. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to relapse into the old silence, allowing May to think that though under the pressure of great dread he had spoken of Varese's murder, yet that fear being now replaced by tolerable security, her sympathy was unneeded, or at least could not counterbalance the pain of speech.

'I am not ill at all, Alan,' said May, in answer to his question, adding with an emphasis intentionally, but for her aim uselessly, significant, 'I should be afraid to be ill just now.'

Nevertheless other questioning than Alan's betrayed that May was not then looking quite herself. Anxiety for her brother's safety being somewhat soothed, her own suffering, from which nothing could secure her, the sacrifice of love and hope, which the knowledge of his guilt demanded, becoming more oppressive to her feelings, more prominent in her thoughts, affected for a time her appearance and her manners. Mr. Lucas had complained to Catherine only of the former, but the latter before long caused him more uneasiness and surprise.

May, with her fatal knowledge, her conviction that a final separation must come soon, could not be the same as she had been. And even if she could, expediency would have been against it. An absolute rupture was, indeed, at present to be avoided; but it would at all times be difficult to bring about altogether of a sudden, and the sooner she prepared to free Philip Lucas from an engagement which she never could fulfil, and whose continuance was under such circumstances an injury to him, the better.

To consult expediency alone, however, was as yet almost more than she had strength or self-command to do. In Philip's presence

she could neither force herself to assume her old light-hearted ways, nor, as yet, consciously endeavour to be reserved and cold. The best she could do was to avoid him—a course to which her unhappiness and fear naturally led, but which was to Philip Lucas particularly offensive. If her manner perplexed him, he could instantly inquire the cause, but plain speaking itself was powerless against a culprit who evaded all conversation. Some little time elapsed before May's frequent absence at the hours of his usual visits to Bellair appeared to him in any other light than that of a disagreeable chance. It did not, indeed, occur to him to ascribe it to any other cause, till one day when May had failed to escape him, he detected for the first time an alteration in manner as well.

It was about the middle of December, some three weeks after Ragagni had begun his visit at Bellair, Philip, coming over according to custom, encountered May setting forth for a walk. Through the park there ran a long straight path, which afforded sometimes a nearer approach for Philip Lucas than the main entrance, according to the direction of his previous walk. Approaching the house by this path, wherein no turnings intervened

to obstruct his view, he could distinguish a certain scarlet jacket May was fond of wearing in the cold dull weather, advancing from the opposite end.

Walking with her head down, and at an unusually slow and faltering pace, May continued ignorant that any one was coming towards her till Philip drew near enough to call. Then she saw escape to be impossible, and her steps grew slower even yet.

‘Going out, May?’ said Philip as he came up. ‘I should have missed you again, if I had come round the usual way. Why didn’t you tell me that you took your walks now at a different time?’

‘I didn’t think of it,’ said May, giving the first answer that came to hand.

‘Well, I shall know now. Where are you going?’

‘Nowhere in particular,’ she answered, foreseeing what would follow, and powerless to prevent it. ‘I’m walking for walking’s sake.’ As she expected, he turned to accompany her.

‘Don’t walk here, May, another day,’ he said in so doing. ‘This path is pleasant enough in summer time, not in such weather as this; the wind is too sharp; it blows in one

long draught from end to end between the trees.'

'It doesn't hurt me. I never take cold.'

'I don't know about that,' said Philip, using a favourite mode of expressing his dissent. 'I've noticed lately that you were not looking very well.'

May started at this repeated warning. She had meant to be very brave and hide her trouble, and it at once mortified and alarmed her to find she had fallen short of success.

'Philip,' she replied, with an instant attempt to resume her former manner, 'do you know you are very rude? You ought always to think me looking well.'

'Then I don't,' said Philip, 'at this minute, May, you don't look well at all.'

She was quite conscious that she did not. The momentary playfulness had not been without effort, the allusion to their relation to each other, a relation that must so quickly end, as soon as it was uttered had been followed by a sharp pang.

'You are full of fancies,' she said, meeting with difficulty the half puzzled, half questioning look of his eyes.

'I'm the last man to be fanciful,' he answered, half resentfully, 'and I never pay

compliments. You're not looking well, and you don't take enough care of yourself. There is no reason why you should come out by this cold passage. Don't do it, May, any more.'

'I like it,' said May, quite aware, however, that resistance would displease; 'it brings one out on the high road without making that long uphill round under the park fence.'

'The uphill round will do you no harm; you can stand the distance better than you can this draught. Why should you walk on the high road at all in this bleak weather? It's the most exposed place you could choose.'

'You must be thinking of Catherine, Philip. Cold never hurts me,' said May impatiently. After that he did not argue further, but walked on in silence. May knew that he was angered by her opposition. That knowledge she could have borne serenely, but not the consciousness that it was better for him to be vexed with her, that she must deny herself the pleasure of restoring his good humour by presently submitting to his commands. In a little while she would have no more right to any care from him; knowing what she did, she felt as if she had none now.

She did not speak to him again, and they

arrived in silence at the gate of the long lane under the trees. As he shut it when they had passed through, he directed towards her an authoritative glance.

‘You are not to come this way, May, as long as this sharp weather lasts.’

‘It is very likely that I shall, Philip.’

He looked at her in surprise. Her opinions she was in the habit of maintaining with great tenacity, but in what she did Philip had always found her ready to submit to his direction, and now she threatened to disregard his wish, his absolute command in a mere trifle.

‘You are not obliged to come this way?’ he said, thinking that some reason beyond mere preference of her own must instigate such opposition to the desire he expressed.

‘It is tiresome to come round by the fence.’

‘That is no reason at all,’ said Philip.

They were going forward now, and approaching that part of the high road that he had declared to be exposed and bleak. The simple question of the fitness or unfitness of such a walk for May, was now lost in the more important consideration of maintaining over her the authority he thought essential to her welfare. In three years’ time Philip meant to have a most submissive wife, and submis-

sion, therefore, could not be learned too soon.

‘We will not go any further, May.’

Had May been opposing him of her own goodwill she could have held out even against that determined tone. But it was only, as it happened, in obedience to a sense of very painful expediency that she had resisted him so far. She turned in silence, and his face cleared as he thus recovered satisfaction with himself, if not with her. As for her threat to walk again in the long draughty glade under the park trees, she should be strictly questioned in future whether she had really dared to be as good as her word. For the present, having obtained some sort of victory, he felt passably content. It was not his way, though inexorable when offended by persons that were indifferent or distasteful to him, to brood with resentful recollection over any delinquency in those to whom he was attached. Having so far triumphed over May as to be actually leading her along the path he had chosen for her, he became gracious again, a certain condescending tone alone betraying that his forgiveness was not so free as to be quite unconscious.

Sad at heart as she was, and having expe-

rienced in his brief displeasure some foretaste of the pain awaiting her when he should have the right to call her changeable and heartless, May could not recover herself so as to answer with corresponding cheerfulness his indifferent remarks. She knew he must be thinking her sullen and rebellious, but the knowledge was only another weight upon her spirits. He did think so, and was full of wonder. Any such disposition he had never known her to display before. When they reached Bellair he expressed to Catherine some little of his uneasiness, asking again whether she had noticed May to be otherwise than well? Catherine in reply declaring that nothing ever ailed her, and further charging him with exaggerated tenderness of anxiety, he said no more, impelled to the conclusion that May's temper rather than her health had been in fault. Further reflection upon her constant absence whenever he had visited Bellair of late, added at once to his disquiet and his displeasure. Taken in connection with her manner to him that morning, it appeared more like arrangement, and less like chance. Plain speaking no doubt would set all straight, only if this avoidance of him should continue, the remedy would be difficult to apply. And so he found it, May

possessing far more ingenuity to escape than he had to contrive interviews when a thorough explanation might be obtained. Besides there were times when May found herself incapable of exhibiting opposition and reserve. High spirits she could not achieve, but if the old cheerfulness was consistently absent from her manner, the old tenderness would occasionally re-appear. Then Philip, growing bewildered between past estrangement and present affection, ascribed all that had been displeasing either to his own imagination or illness in May, experiencing at this last idea an anxiety so keen that he dared not hint at it to May herself, becoming secretly amazed at forebodings which without greater foundation he should have thought himself too strong to entertain.

So, anxiously for all, unhappily for most, the midwinter passed and grew into a forward spring.

CHAPTER II.

THE end of March was drawing near, and with it a necessity which, since the last days of November, Alan Valery had foreseen with dread. In the intervening months Ragagni had not failed to require the fulfilment of the first stipulation in their agreement. All that Alan could call his own had thus passed into his master's hands. When the next claim for money should be made, Alan would have to choose between absolute refusal and an application to his wife. Such application to Catherine, to be effective, must not be gentle. For no mere request would she supply him with the means to satisfy Ragagni's exorbitant demands. She was extremely jealous of any interference in her money matters, holding her purse strings with vigorous, independent, if not ungenerous fingers. Nor had she such confidence in Alan as would prevail upon her

to put large sums into his hands without knowing to what use they would be applied. He could not obtain what he would require or any part of it on these terms by Catherine's free will. He would only get it by making her afraid of him. And so to obtain her money, and for such a purpose, to prolong the life which she was eager to destroy, was a task from which he naturally shrank. At the same time to refuse was death. He might be pardoned if he shrank from this alternative. Still more, the way in which he would have to die had its own peculiar terrors, for which he could find but little consolation in the cause. He could not say to himself that when Ragagni's claim for money should be made he would refuse and die. He made no resolution one way or the other; living in daily terror of the demand that could not for much longer be delayed. The winter had been a time of strange and awful trial. The ceaseless presence, the never-intermitted watch, of his destined executioner was in itself the bitterest of punishments to a nature solitary and reserved. At no moment was he secure from this supervision. He was a prisoner without the privacy of a prison. If he sat in the study at the far end of the house, there also

sat Ragagni with him, always busy. He might not speak, he might not even appear to overlook. But Alan knew all the time that not a gesture escaped the notice of those stern and quiet eyes.

When thus by themselves Alan never spoke to him, save when the fulfilment of some stipulation in their mutual compact made conversation unavoidable for a time. If upon any other occasion Ragagni spoke, he encountered only sullen silence. Alan could not discourse calmly with the man who was to murder him some day in a future that might not be far off. The horror of that looking forward, the humiliation of looking back, resentment against the man who had achieved his ruin, rendered speech impossible. He kept his fear locked up as far as he could in his own heart, he put a cruel pressure even upon the weakness of failing health, carrying his head high, and resisting constitutional nervousness and languor, that he might appear before his enemy strong to bear and to expect the worst. But such self-command as could maintain indifferent intercourse with him, when not constrained by the presence of others thereto, required strength beyond his youth, and a composure incompatible with the bitterness of his hate.

In all the hours that they spent together alone, sometimes for the space of days and weeks, there would pass between them not a single word ; there would be no sound in the room but the turning of a leaf, the scratching of a pen, or the stirring of the fire to which Ragagni's southern chilliness compelled attention.

Companionship so intimate between two men whose early acquaintance had promised no such result, at first occasioned natural surprise. Catherine was inclined to attribute it to a perverse determination on Alan's part to disprove her unflattering insinuation that her cousin was above his appreciation. Philip saw nothing at first, then experienced a mighty wonder that a man so sagacious as Ragagni should not have detected Alan Valery's falseness and other unamiable qualities, after which he forgot to think about it any more. May beheld the new friendship with indescribable thankfulness, and Ragagni was a hero and a saviour in her eyes. The great secret which he held as well as herself was never spoken of between them, yet she entertained full confidence of sympathy, and did not fear before him to let her spirits droop ungoaded to further exertion. He knew what she suffered, and for her had pity as for Alan.

And, indeed, he was kind to her—kinder than ever. Alan observing now and then his tender and protecting manner, could have almost believed he had a real compassion for her, and that, in declaring the plan of secret punishment to have recommended itself doubly to him as sheltering May partially from the trouble that must come, he had spoken truth. But it was a compassion barren of further fruit, and not even so far such that Alan could endure to see May's lavish gratitude and unalloyed esteem. Passionate anger stirred within him whenever any little token of May's love and reverence for Ragagni came under his notice. But he had to hide it, and May, not supposing that such a feeling could exist, failed to perceive its signs.

The first blow that fell upon her was Alan's demand for money from his wife—a blow that even then shook only her confidence in Ragagni's power, and not his willingness wholly to protect.

In the early days of April, as Alan and Ragagni were together in the study, he was required to make that long foreseen and difficult choice. Alan had grown weary of reading—of the attempt to lose consciousness, or, at any rate, appear unconscious of those ever-

watchful eyes. He had risen and stood at the window, looking out at the young leaves and freshly springing grass. Perhaps some contrast was in his mind between that new, vigorous life and his own—frail, uncertain, and drawing, probably, young though it was, to a terrible and speedy close. As if the movement woke him from his serious abstraction to a remembrance of present necessity, Ragagni suddenly broke the customary silence. 'While I remember me of it,' he said, calmly, without lifting his head, 'I am become poor.'

Alan Valery, though he heard clearly, did not turn or speak. The great question had been raised at last. He took hurried counsel with himself what he should do. Receiving no reply, Ragagni presently looked up. Leaning in the window corner, he could see Alan's face, and probably discovered in its expression something more troubled than the angry acquiescence with which his demands were generally met. A little longer he occupied himself with what he was about, then, rising, approached the window himself.

'The season advances,' he observed, gazing out. Alan Valery turned with a start.

'You have got whatever money I had,' he

said abruptly; 'I have nothing more now in the world.'

'Yes?' said Ragagni; then, after a pause, 'Catherine abounds with it. Now, you will find the advantage of a rich wife.'

Silence followed this reasonable remark.

'Her money is not mine,' said Alan, hurriedly, at length.

'You intended not to serve yourself of it for this. Well, I know it! Ma—it must be done.'

Truly it must, unless he would rather die than take her money wherewith to buy his life—a life which, as that of Varese's murderer, did she but know it, she would spend her whole fortune to destroy.

'She will not give it,' he said, preferring to propose difficulties aloud than to hold any longer the silent debate in which conscience was being driven to defeat by fear.

'No?' said Ragagni. 'If so it is all your affair.' So Alan translated the brief interrogative reply. 'You have not forgotten our arrangement—provide me with money, or else give me your life in payment for the life you have taken, and I will go my way.'

Still he asked himself what he should do, and still from the first foresaw what would be done. He could not yield himself so soon to

this grim death. Nevertheless, it would take some time yet to adopt Ragagni's proposition. Alan left his station by the window, going back to his books, as if the conversation had been concluded by that assurance that Catherine would not give.

He sat down and appeared to read. It was all appearance, as also was that indifference of Ragagni, whereby in fact a great anxiety was hid. He was by no means willing that his connection with Alan Valery should so quickly find the bloody termination exacted by his revenge, but in no way profitable to the cause. He did not believe that Alan Valery would in the end refrain from pressing, if need were, by force from Catherine money that she could not want, and which would for the moment save his life. But he was aware of obstinacy in his victim, and a sullen rage against himself that might successfully combat for a time the dread of death. Ragagni went round presently to where he sate. Alan did not seem conscious of the movement till, being come quite close, Ragagni laid his hand upon his shoulder. Then an uncontrollable shrinking confessed his terrible influence, and the dark dreary eyes lifted with a glare of fear and hate.

'Ecco,' said Ragagni, unmoved in voice

and glance, 'you tremble solely at that! How will you bear it when there shall be death in this hand?'

A momentary flicker was perceptible in Alan's gaze, but he did not speak.

'You are not in fretta for that time—no more am I. Nothing the less——'

With that warning 'nevertheless' he removed his hand, and once more buried himself in his former occupation.

An hour afterwards Alan Valery sought his wife's morning room. It was a pleasant apartment, looking out upon the gardens, with a distant view of Lynnwater and the bay. The day was warm for April, but Catherine, always chilly, had her sofa drawn close up to the fire. Alan sat down by her in silence. His task was difficult, and he was thinking by what means he could smooth the difficulties in his way.

'Well,' said Catherine, 'what have you been doing?' It displeased her that he should come there and say nothing, though at the same time she lacked energy or interest to make conversation for him herself.

'Nothing very particular. You are looking better to-day;' a remark which Catherine never took as a compliment. She esteemed it the

especial privilege and distinction of her sorrow to look always ill.

‘I am not feeling better. I don’t think you know when I look ill or well.’

‘That may be,’ said Alan; ‘you always look well to me in one sense.’

‘Alan, I’m tired of compliments!’ exclaimed Catherine, speaking out of the very sickness of vain longing for the silenced voice that once had made them sweet. ‘They were all very well some time ago, but now they are simply absurd. To be always saying soft nothings is so like a boy! You never hear men talking such nonsense to their wives.’

‘You don’t know when you are well off,’ said Alan; ‘once you liked well enough to hear me call you handsome.’

‘Not for your sake,’ answered Catherine sharply.

She had no particular provocation to be unkind, no stronger impulse than usual to be contrary and cross. But to be reminded of that time when her beauty had been dear to her was to bring into contrast with those happy days the impatient indifference, the ineffable weariness of the present. Her beauty was gone, nor, had she possessed it, would it

have been of any great value, since its influence could be exercised on Alan alone.

His face changed unpleasantly at her rude answer. Perceiving the gathering cloud, some faint compunction perhaps arose in Catherine's breast.

'What does it signify whether a married woman be beautiful or plain?' she added.

'If she doesn't care to please her husband, nothing at all.'

'Don't get into one of your jealous rages to-day, *pray*, dear!' said Catherine with impatient supplication.

'I am neither jealous nor in a rage.'

He got up and went away from her to the window. He was utterly sick at heart. Why, he asked himself, should he care so much to live? Would it not be better that he should die? Catherine's indifference he would hardly be conscious of in the grave; she would be free of her distasteful bond. In the same earth Varese and himself might lie at peace; the tormenting jealousy, the unconquerable hate, that now consumed him would then vex his soul no more. May would be delivered from a great anxiety. Why had he not courage enough to die?

As he stood possessed by such considera-

tions, a figure with head bent, and hands clasped behind him, slowly crossed the lawn, towards which Alan's absent gaze was turned. There was a start like that which in the study an hour ago had acknowledged Ragagni's touch. The sight of his executioner seemed to bring death wonderfully near. As Ragagni passed under the window he looked up. The glance was calm and fixed, clear of impatience as of brutality. Nevertheless Alan had been reminded before it was withdrawn that delay was dangerous, opposition fatal—had read in it a menace as intelligible as it was composed, which diverted his thoughts instantly from the possible advantages which would follow to the certain moment of supreme pain which must be suffered first—to an hour of secrecy and silence—helpless loneliness and a vengeance as relentless as it would be calm.

‘Catherine, will you do something for me?’ He had come back and was leaning upon the head of the sofa. She could not see his face, but something in the tone struck her as peculiar, almost alarming.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked.

‘I must have a few hundreds, Catherine, just for the present.’

‘Just for the present,’ was added almost

unawares to soften the request; that there could be no repayment he well knew. Indeed the only sense in which that addition to his hurried sudden speech was likely to be fulfilled, was that the few hundreds would but for the present suffice.

‘Why!—what for?’ She sat up, turning round that she might look at him. Amazement and displeasure were equally visible in her face. Catherine was not mean, but she loved rather to give than to be asked. The request took her utterly by surprise, suggesting boyish follies and extravagances on the part of her young husband, if no worse. ‘Good heaven, Alan, what can you want so large a sum of money for as that?’

He was quite aware that gentleness would be of little avail, but he shrank yet from adopting a more violent tone. As he looked down at her he even tried the cajolery of his handsome eyes — a smile, very touching, though not in the way he desired it to be, by its transparent contrast with the fear and trouble written in his face.

‘Come, Catherine,’ he said, ‘be generous, you don’t want the money, you are as rich as you can be—whilst I—you know how poor I am!’

‘Poor! you should not be poor—you ought not to have any wants. What can you need more than you already have? You are like a boy, Alan! “A few hundreds”—just to throw away!’

Perhaps at that moment it struck Alan for the first time that, compared to Catherine, he was a boy. Her manner set her so far above his own youthful level, her face had so suspicious and worn a glance, he felt rather as if he were pleading with a mother difficult to manage, holding absolute control over his fortunes, than a wife whose part was confidence and submission.

‘To throw away! Nonsense! But I have a need for it.’

‘What for?’

There was the great hindrance to success—the impossibility of answering that most natural question. For a minute he considered with himself whether by any expedient he could deceive her. After all, he chose not to deceive, but to say plainly that he could not tell.

‘There’s a little difficulty there, Catherine,’ he said. ‘Your question is most reasonable and right, as I admit. Nevertheless, I am not in a position to reply.’

‘And do you think,’ cried Catherine indig-

nantly, 'that I'll give you money to throw away, without having any account of how it's spent? It would be absolutely criminal! Money is not given one to waste.'

'Why do you talk as if it would be wasted? One would suppose you were my mother, Catherine, rather than my wife! I tell you there is a good use for the money—a downright necessity. Come, give it me!'

'A downright necessity! Let me hear what it is. I am old enough to be your mother, am I? I might be that and not be very old. But as you say I am old, I will at any rate be wise. To encourage a young man in folly and extravagance is sinful, and I won't do it! I've a use for the money myself. I've no more than I can spare.'

'I never said you were old enough to be my mother,' he interposed at the first pause.

'You did.'

'I said nothing of the sort! What I said—'

'O, I heard you!' exclaimed Catherine with contemptuous indignation. She might not value his compliments, but such an observation as she now ascribed to him aroused her utmost resentment nevertheless.

'You heard me say, the manner you adopted would be more becoming in a mother than a

wife; a mother reproving an incorrigible prodigal son, rather than a wife answering a husband at the first trial of her confidence and love.'

'You are not fit to be a husband, Alan, if you give yourself up to such follies.'

'What follies? I tell you it is no folly. Do you suppose I want it to spend in pleasure? I ask for it because I must have it. You should make no question after hearing that; I must have it.'

She had snatched up her work, venting her indignation in hasty vehement stitches. Her hands, as Alan watched them moving, looked very thin, and in her excitement they shook. The half-rising passion fell again at the sight of her weak fingers, and the tiny garment on which they were employed.

'Catherine, I would not press you now upon a matter that annoys you, however unreasonable I might think you were, if I could help it. But it is my necessity, not my will.'

'Say what necessity, then.'

'I can't; I am bound not to say.'

She worked on in silence, her face quivering with anger, consternation, and revolt. He saw the time for gentleness was past.

'You have it by you, I know, Catherine,'

he said presently in a peculiar low voice.
'Let me have it at once.'

'I have not got it by me.' It was a falsehood, and he knew it.

'Give me your keys.' She did not move, and he rifled her work-basket in his search. His movements, distinguished rather by haste than care, resulted in infinite disorder.

'Alan,' exclaimed Catherine with suppressed vehemence, 'you are brutal. Take your hands out; the keys are not there.'

'Where are they, then?'

She set her lips in obstinate silence.

'For God's sake, Catherine, and your own, don't provoke me any more!'

Then the sullen cloud melted into a shower of angry tears. A sob, full of defeat, resentment, a growing alarm, shook Catherine's frame. Slowly she drew the keys forth from their hiding place in her pocket, and let him take them with him from the room. Some time afterwards he brought them back, and sitting down in silence made some vain masculine efforts to repair the confusion he had created in her work-table. She would neither speak nor look. What he had done, it would take her a long while to forgive, if ever she forgave at all.

CHAPTER III.

DURING that gloomy winter May's visits were frequent at the Manns'. There was encouragement to go there in the fact that, absorbed in consideration of their own affairs, their observation was in no way dangerously keen. In addition to their unalterable, unmitigable grievances, they also were about this time in trouble. The invalid relative whose expected visit had favoured May's removal to Bellair, had ever since his arrival remained a great weight upon their hearts and hands.

Lynnwater had never seen him; so sick was he, he never appeared downstairs. Its sympathy therefore he had found no opportunity to enlist. But his entertainers claimed it for themselves of every one they saw. The trouble, the expense, the sorrow, the wonder, for to them it was full as much a wonder as a grief, that their destined heir, already precious as

the future possessor of so much wealth, should be afflicted like an ordinary mortal. All these points had been discussed with their acquaintance till, had not the conduct of Captain and Mrs. Mann undeceived them, that acquaintance would have thought the subject must from exhaustion necessarily drop.

Of this plaintive discourse May naturally had her full share. Whether she really heard all the touching details that were brought before her consideration, might be matter of doubt. But she came often to be talked to, said 'yes' and 'no' at proper intervals, shook her head compassionately, and contrived to look as if she heard.

'It's so provoking, now, ain't it?' said Mrs. Mann. 'It might have been very pleasant you know, if he had had his health, and the captain's that troublesome to have in the house when there's a sick person! He just takes advantage of my being busy and out of the way like, for his own goings on. Ah! dear!'

'Where is he to-day?' said May.

On that occasion she had not come to the house in the High Street alone. Ragagni was with her, and indeed very frequently was. May felt at ease in his society, and was always thankful when opportunity suffered him by

engaging in conversation with others to divert their attention in some measure from herself, assistance which he appeared very clever and careful in affording her.

He had long since disabused Mrs. Mann's mind of any idea that he had joined in the offensive ridicule of Varese—ridicule which she had with difficulty forgiven in consideration of the terrible retribution since then exacted by a righteous fate. Ragagni was a very constant companion of May Valery whenever she went to see her guardians, and was now scarcely less cordially welcomed than herself.

'Where, then, is the capitano?' he repeated.

'Oh!' exclaimed Mrs. Mann with vivacity, intimating by peculiar gestures that a fertile topic of conversation was thus recalled to her mind, though its connection with their question her guests were at first somewhat puzzled to perceive. 'It is such a fine day, you know, ain't it? This morning I said I should go out. "James doesn't want me," I said,—to Captain Mann, you know,—"I'll ride over to Richleigh." I thought I'd go to the hairdresser and have my hair done, you see.'

'Well?' said May wearily. The harangue she perceived was likely to be long. She took off her hat, therefore, and made herself com-

fortable in a low chair, smiling at the same time a little sad smile of amused vexation at Ragagni.

‘Si, signora?’ said Ragagni, patiently polite.

‘Well, I said I should ride. I haven’t ridden a long time, and riding’s very good for the figure.’ She drew herself up, and suffered an emphatic pause.

‘Evidently,’ May commented to herself.

‘Well, and he says, “Yes, do”—troublesome feller that he is! And when I came down from James an hour after, what’s he done, but taken the mare and ridden off to Richleigh *hissself*,’ said Mrs. Mann with indignant accent.

‘He is anxious about his figure,’ said May gravely.

‘You always take his side, and you’re an ungrateful girl,’ retorted Mrs. Mann. ‘There’s a chip of the old block, Signor Ragagni! She’s a regular Mann, the captain over again in lots of things!’

It was the severest accusation that could in Mrs. Mann’s estimation be made, and perhaps May entertained much the same opinion. Her face expressed a momentary horror.

‘I should not have thought I was very like

him,' she replied, however, with studied moderation.

'Look sharp that you don't grow so,' answered Mrs. Mann in a tone of serious warning, 'and take care you don't marry just such another.'

Unable to conceive any likeness between Philip Lucas and the captain, and believing her marriage with anyone at all equally removed from probability, May listened to this terrible insinuation without alarm.

'How is your sick person, signora?' asked Ragagni, taking advantage of the pause that followed.

He always inquired after the younger captain with interest, according to Mrs. Mann's long replies a patience very precious to one who had already outwearied that of every other friend. The report was always the same, however; he was always worse. Mrs. Mann's legs ached till she expected them to drop off with going up and down stairs, and Captain Mann betrayed unchristian want of feeling in walking heavily and shutting doors with a bang.

'What is the use of asking?' May exclaimed, as she walked homewards with Ra-

gagni up the street. 'Her legs always ache, the poor old captain always bangs the doors, the unfortunate man himself is always worse, and must get worse, I suppose.'

'So you think? Is he not to be cured by any means?'

'I fancy not,' said May.

'The inheritor of them,' observed Ragagni, thoughtfully, 'when he shall be dead, who will obtain their possessions? Is it not true that they are very rich?'

'I believe they have a great deal of money. Who would be the heir if this poor fellow dies I've no idea. They have no other relations in the world.'

'You and your brother are parents of theirs, is it not true?' he said quickly.

'Yes, but it is well understood that we are to be no richer for that.'

She said it without hesitation, expressing a conviction which long habit seemed to have made certainty. Nevertheless, after she had spoken she fell into a little dreamy speculation upon the possibility suggested by Ragagni's words. That day money was wonderfully prominent in May's thoughts. She had been told, in somewhat bitter terms, by Catherine of Alan's sudden and inexplicable need of

funds. To her it was nearly as inexplicable, and far more affrighting than it had been to his wife. May had not imagined that any held his secret except that generous forgiving protector of whose silence she had received the pledge. Nevertheless when she heard that he required hundreds for some private use, knowing him to be guiltless of extravagant habits, she could not but connect this necessity in some manner with his crime. All her old terrors came back upon her. It seemed fearfully perilous in her eyes, this demanding money from Catherine.

The right or wrong of such a course she would not then consider, but the danger was without consideration plain. Would he want more? Catherine would probably refuse to give. For the first time May felt an interest in the destination of the fortune of the Manns. The present heir, so rumour said, was past recovery. Who would be chosen to fill his place? Herself and Alan would become by his death the only remaining relatives of Captain Mann.

They walked on silently. It was one inestimable comfort of Ragagni's society that in his presence May might be thoughtful and unhappy if she chose. He knew the reason, and

so avoided all remark. Only by a manner compassionate, almost tender, did he ever remind her of the fearful secret which they shared.

This habitual silence, together with a feeling that she had better ask Alan first, restrained a strong impulse to inquire of Ragagni if he knew or could imagine the cause of Alan's sudden need. The question had been on her lips more than once, but was each time hastily suppressed. She would try first to regain that confidence which Alan had so unexpectedly, she had almost said ungratefully, withdrawn.

For doing this she found opportunity that same day, and from preference, either natural or learned of Philip Lucas, for straightforward measures, lost little time in asking what she wished to know.

'Alan, Catherine has been telling me that you are in want of money,' she said to him abruptly. (Of course they were alone. At that very moment, as it happened, Catherine and Ragagni were wondering together over the same matter, the latter urging Mrs. Valery, with what he had good reasons for considering the best advice, to place trust in her young husband and give whatever he might ask.)

'Oh! did she tell you?' Embarrassment,

irritation, and alarm penetrated the tone of assumed indifference in which Alan spoke. May felt hurt and frightened by the evident intention of reserve.

‘Alan, dear, you don’t know how hard upon me it is to hear of all this and not be told the cause. Not to be told, that is, whilst I must guess enough to be miserable.’

Had it been possible to tell her all, such telling after those long months of lonely expectation, under the present pressure of anticipated agonies, daily drawing nearer, would have afforded him inexpressible comfort and relief. But not the less for that was he cut off from doing so. Alone must this cross, unparalleled in pain and heaviness, be borne.

Still, though he knew he must not answer, he drew her down to sit beside him on the sofa, with a kind of sorrowful tenderness, asking, ‘What is it you want to know, May?’

‘This money—what do you require it for?’

‘Are you grown curious, little girl?’

‘Alan,’ said May firmly, ‘you are not treating me well. Cannot you trust me? You did before, and you said I comforted you; now you keep me at a distance, as if you had no confidence in me. I am left alone with the most harassing anxiety. Is there some fresh

danger that makes you want this money? Is there some one to buy off? Oh, Alan, tell me, can it be that anyone else knows what you have done?’

The appeal was hard to resist, enforced as it was by her large lifted eyes, full of grief and tender reproach, only asking to know the truth that she might help if possible, at least sympathize with his new trouble.

For a long while he kept silence, thinking how best to fashion his reply. Something he must say to set her at rest, nor would he have had any hesitation in so doing if he could have quickly determined what answer would best accomplish that end.

‘There is a secret here,’ he answered, turning to her at last. ‘A secret not altogether mine. That is why I can tell neither you nor Catherine what it is wanted for.’

‘A secret that has nothing to do with—with’—

He interposed before she could finish. ‘Nothing.’

‘O, Alan,’ she cried, after a searching glance which he met steadily in vain, ‘that is not true; you are trying to deceive me! I see it in your face! Am I not brave enough then? Have I betrayed your trust in any way? Don’t you

see that this new anxiety is enough to break my heart, if you leave me in doubt?’

‘You should be satisfied with my answer.’

‘Do you suppose I do not see it isn’t true?’ said May reproachfully. ‘Alan, I wonder how it is you can so easily say things that are not true! Does Ragagni know about this secret?’

‘No.’

‘Couldn’t he help you?’

‘No.’

‘He is so clever, he has so much experience; don’t you think he might?’

‘You forget it is a secret which is not all mine, and that I must not tell.’

‘Alan, it *has* something to do with Varese!’

He shrank visibly at the name.

‘There was somebody else concerned as well as you?’ she asked, seizing with eagerness, for a brief moment, the idea that he had been but in part, and probably the least, guilty.

‘No, no one,’ he answered hastily and low, ‘it was I alone, May. I told you about it once; it is not a thing to tell over again.’

His voice commanded silence. May was not given to tears, but seeing herself thus doomed to an ignorance which could only be identical with the sharpest anxiety, denied his confidence,

and left to imagine dangers worse perhaps than the true, her eyes overflowed.

‘You are not right, Alan, or wise. You think you are saving me, and you hurt me more than all,’ she said, making a last appeal. ‘I am very quick to see what is not true, and when you said this money—this want of money has nothing to do with what you have done, I knew at once you were not speaking truth. I can see there is fresh danger. You have no debts, you never were extravagant. The necessity can only spring from that.’

‘How should you know whether I have any debts?’ But the repeated denial had scarcely left his lips before there came a sudden impulse, swift and strong, to tell her part at least. If she had guessed the truth contrary assertions would have little power to console. ‘There is no danger as long as there is money.’

For all May had declared herself beforehand so sure, the admission thus at last conveyed could not be heard without a shock. He felt her tremble.

‘Some one knows? Some one else?’ she asked breathlessly, tightening her grasp upon his hand as though she saw the present peril.

‘Everything is safe, dear, for the loss of a little money. Since you preferred to know

the worst I have told you; but don't ask for particulars.'

'Not ask anything more?'

'No, dear child, not a word more.'

'O, Alan, I wish I had money!'

'I would not take it if you had. Besides, I don't want it.'

'Catherine doesn't like your using hers,' said May timidly, yet unable to stifle all expression of the reluctance with which she saw him take it, 'and if it was mine, I would give it with my whole heart. Alan, you have some of your own, would not that be enough?'

'I have not got it now,' said Alan.

'You have been obliged to give that up?'

'Every farthing. Now here is Ragagni coming, and I am glad the conversation is at an end. I would have spared you if I could. As it is, you know the very worst. Go now, dear, before he comes in.'

Leaving the room in obedience, she met Ragagni in the doorway. A look of trouble—of struggle with himself, appeared momentarily in his face as she passed, pale, consternation in her aspect, the rare tears still standing in her eyes.

'You have said something to her?' he exclaimed abruptly when the door was closed.

'She guessed, of course, that there was some one to be bought off. She has no idea that the bribe went to you.'

The voice that to May had been so gentle, had grown sullen and defiant with a sudden change.

CHAPTER IV.

BEFORE the end of March there was an heir born to Bellair. No rejoicings celebrated his appearance, unless in Catherine's forlorn and wearied heart waking up out of its indifference to take comfort in the little existence depending upon her, and in the love which for a time at any rate she might hope to possess undivided, whose helplessness naturally commended it to hers. The expectation had not been much to her, accompanied as it was by the fear that its realization would probably be the limit of her life. But the actual fruition gave a new impulse to such germs of tenderness as yet lingered in her breast. She seemed softer, younger, during those days of weakness and fresh hope.

Not that the fresh hope in any way lessened the old sorrow. Still, with a sad perversity of affection as she lay, incapable of exertion, her

thoughts were less occupied with the future, wherein the figures of husband and child must of necessity stand prominently forth, than in the past, with the lover now lying unavenged in his grave. The child in her arms might be a comfort in her disappointment, a consolation to her vain yearning. Its helplessness and dependence ministered strange soothing to the bitterness of ungratified revenge, amidst whose stern aspirations it came into the world. But it could not remove the disappointment or appease the fruitless longing, could not turn her thoughts from that sombre enterprise whose success alone could make her satisfied with life. Very true, notwithstanding her marriage with Alan—that temporary madness—had Catherine been to the memory of Varese.

In the long idle hours the details of that faithful labour in which she never, nor Philip Lucas before the failure of his grand discovery shook his stubborn resolution, had faltered for a moment; scheme after scheme, by which justice was to have been procured for the dead, passed in review before her recollection. Catherine's perseverance was not generally great, nor her constancy to any particular design. Nevertheless, whatever was the reason,

that discovery, which even Philip had learned to look upon as futile, continued to be of importance in her eyes. Perhaps because she still retained, against all argument, growing with indulgence, strengthening by contradiction, the notion that she herself on some former occasion had beheld that self-same ring. In her illness the idea had by some strange process wonderfully gathered force. She recurred to it again and again till she had become finally persuaded that what had at first seemed even in her own eyes possibly mere fancy became certain as an actual fact.

The only question—one of the first consequence no doubt—which she could not satisfactorily settle, was, where and under what circumstances she had seen the ring. But even her vivid imagination, urged on by a fierce eagerness to determine time and place, and definitely fix her wavering suspicions, failed in this. On this important subject no idea that she could form was clear.

With all this, however, occupying her thoughts, she was yet kinder to Alan, feeling perhaps capable of deeper regard for him as the father of her child. Weakness too had temporarily subdued her irritable temper, and bringing out all the fulness and tenderness of

his love, there prevailed between them an unusual peacefulness and calm.

But with the earliest days of her getting about again, it was rudely broken by a fresh demand for money.

Finding that repeated which she had deemed scarce pardonable for once, Catherine's indignation was beyond bounds. But it proved of little avail. Partly for her sake, that irritating, exhausting discussion might be avoided, Alan had been very stern and determined from the first—with a sternness that was strangely subduing when worn by features gentle generally like his—a determination that supplied the inferiority of youth, setting him above her on the ground of superior strength, and a will that would take no denial. She had to yield, but for that very reason was the more bitterly incensed. Again she applied to Ragagni for advice—rather she announced to him her resolution to give no more.

'It is a thing to marvel at—for what he can have need of so much money,' Ragagni answered, without strongly pressing upon her to give, believing, not unreasonably, that the necessity under which her husband acted would be at all times sufficient to overcome her vague

reluctance to give money for a use she did not know.

‘I will certainly give no more!’ said Catherine, bitterly determined.

In the evening, as May took her place to read to her after she had gone to bed, a habit which with returning illness had been resumed, Catherine inquired of her sharply whether she could in any way account for her brother’s misdoing.

‘Pray, are you in his counsels, May?’

At the sudden question the poor little sister, whose conscience was, besides her heart, upon the rack, grew pale.

‘I am quite sure he would not ask it of you if he could help,’ she answered earnestly, and trembling with alarm.

‘Ask it! He takes it!’ cried Catherine, raising herself upright. ‘Do you know what he wants it for?’

‘You must not get excited,’ urged May, hastily retreating from the subject, ‘it will surely make you ill.’

‘Make me ill? I am ill! I have been in a quiver from head to foot all day from the effect of his violence! May, when he chooses, your brother is a brute! He is a coward to treat a poor, weak, sickly woman in the way he treats me! And you would have me sit still, and let

him rob me of everything I possess? I've no doubt you would! One of you is just about as bad as the other! I don't know that anything I've got is safe! My dressing case will be required next, I suppose, and I'm to give that too, without a remonstrance? I daresay!'

'Catherine,' said May, with the calmness of despair when failing breath enforced a pause, 'I wish you would lie down, one would think you must be mad!'

'I wonder I am not mad!' was the passionate retort, Catherine's thoughts straying from exclusive consideration of the present grievance to all the sorrows she had endured or made; 'if misery would really make people mad, I should have been so long ere this! O, what a life I have had! what a life! *what* a life!' Everything taken from me that I loved. Merciful God! And now my very husband is to rob me. It serves me right for marrying a boy, with the prudence of an infant, and the temper of a ruffian!'

Catherine, once angered, and disposed—a disposition she never failed to display—to give vent to her anger in speech, poured out her words with a vehemence that overwhelmed, if it did not convince, rarely showing herself particular in her choice of phrase. May listened

with a grief and terror at her heart that dulled her indignation, suffering dumbly, with a kind of wonder at the fury and rapidity of the torrent thus discharging itself without respect of bounds.

It was very difficult for her to defend her brother to his wife. His crime had injured Catherine more than any one living, his subsequent marriage had been an additional wrong. With the knowledge of all this on her mind, she would have found it hard to speak in his defence, even if his possessing himself of Catherine's money had not been contrary to May's sense of right. What else he could do she did not know, nor was there heroism enough at her command to urge him to abstain from this. But it was a course that never could be justified to one to whom the bitter need that drove him to it could not be explained. She kept silence, and incapable ever of dividing her interest from her brother's, suffered in his stead. Silence however is rarely agreeable to passionate people in the height of their wrath. Catherine's invective became only the more acrid and personal when met by a patience which she took for scorn.

'O yes, Miss Demure, you encourage him in it!' she said. 'You aid and abet him,

and between you two I have no chance! Even Ragagni will give me no assistance. The foolish fellow is taken with your silly little face! But I shall speak to Philip. If he were not blind, he would see something to disapprove in these perpetual walks you are always taking with my cousin Ragagni.'

There was that in this speech which May, with all her long suffering, all her heart-breaking depression, could not but resent. She was not one, however, who spoke readily in anger, or indeed believed that much good could be effected by vehement speaking.

'You are so excited that I suppose you don't know what you are saying,' she answered with slow difficult severity, compelled thus to administer rebuke. 'I should go away and leave you, but that I don't think you are fit to be left, and I should be sorry for Owen to hear what you say.'

Reluctantly provoked to utter disagreeable things, May generally contrived to make them very exasperating, if only by the quietness with which they were said.

For an instant Catherine was silent, surprised, perhaps, or even momentarily cooled, by the chill composure thus contrasted, suddenly, with her own heat. But she was not

one easily abashed, and May was very young. There was only the more vehemence in her manner as she roused herself to retort.

‘I have little doubt you would be sorry for Owen to hear what I say,’ she answered. ‘Well you might be! You would hardly like your wicked ingratitude to be known, your’s and your brother’s too! But things cannot go on like this! Philip Lucas shall interfere!’

‘Well, well, speak to him about it if you choose, but say no more to-night. You know you will never get to sleep.’

‘Sleep! How do you suppose I am to sleep when—’

‘Hush! Be quiet!’ exclaimed May suddenly and with great earnestness; ‘some one is outside.’

‘What do I care?’ cried Catherine, ‘I’ve done nothing to be ashamed of. I should like all the world to hear!’

But May particularly cared just then, having recognised in the step along the gallery Alan Valery’s tread. For a thousand reasons she dreaded his coming in. He could not but be grieved, he might be goaded on—she was always haunted by that fear—to say or do or look something of dangerous interpretation. He might be irritated into passion, and there

was no denying that May's old terror of her brother's temper had been increased fourfold by her knowledge of Varese's fate. The remembrance was a terrible one, and having once learned to what extreme that passion could be roused, she trembled piteously at every gust of wrath.

Though the exact words she used were not distinguishable, Catherine's high voice was easily heard through the closed doors. Alan entered in some haste, uncertain whether she might not be ill. His sister's presence momentarily reassured him.

'O, you are here, May,' he said, pausing, 'I thought something must be the matter.'

He might think so still, for May was pale, and her lips set with that peculiar firmness in her face always significant of pain. A glance from her to his wife, and the recollection of the morning's quarrel made everything clear.

The remembrance of that quarrel was a grief to his heart and a burden to his conscience not to be wholly compensated by the reprieve it had obtained. He came up to Catherine with a hopeless endeavour to make peace.

'How are you, Catherine, to-night?'

She flashed up at him a look of passionate

reproach, and drew back from the meditated caress. The reproach was very cutting—to a degree of which she could form no conception, ignorant as she was of that use to which the money was applied, and very bitter was the loathing with which she turned her face hastily from his kisses. He desisted, standing at the bedside grieved, jealous, remorseful desolation at his heart.

‘What made him love her?’ May inwardly exclaimed, still smarting with the sting of Catherine’s vigorous eloquence, ‘she isn’t even a lady.’

But to all that May so plainly saw, he was as blind now as he had ever been. Catherine’s dislike and anger was a torment to him as he stood there, after enduring for a year her coldness and unwifely assumption of superiority, no less than in those days of fatal rivalry with Varese. This was the extreme unkindness of his fate, that he must either deepen into hatred the indifference of what he passionately loved, or die.

Perceiving the obstinacy of her displeasure, with a sigh he turned presently to go, coming back from the very door, however, to make a last appeal.

‘Say good night to me, Catherine.’

He bent over her, feeling for her hand with his. With a vehement gesture full of scorn and wrath, Catherine pushed him back.

'Out upon you, hypocrite!' she exclaimed, in tragic accents of disgust. Alan moved a little on one side, persevering in his peace-making, much to May's vexation, with singular and fatal constancy.

'Catherine, you ought not to say that; I am grieved to have annoyed you. I would not have done it if it could have been avoided. Come, say good night to me, and let us part in peace.'

Catherine turned sharply at that exhortation. 'I will not say good night to you, nor do I wish you to pass the night in peace. The best wish I can form for you is, that your conscience may be awakened. Take your hand away!'

'Don't stay any longer, Alan,' said May, impatiently, but in a low voice.

At the time she was not looking up. For a moment there was perfect stillness, and as far as she knew, Alan did not move. A sudden exclamation made her lift her eyes.

• 'What's the matter? May, look! Is she ill?'

The summons was very hurried and energetic. Approaching the bedside May then perceived in Catherine's face an expression which, whether or not the consequence of

illness, was infinitely strange. Wide and blank, her large black eyes were fixed upon Alan's hand. It still lay on the coverlet, as he had extended it in the vain hope of inducing her to take it in hers, but May's glance following Catherine's with wondering surprise could perceive in its appearance nothing to account for that unnatural stare.

'My dear Catherine, what is it?' She did not answer. She seemed spell-bound, turned to stone.

'What is it?' repeated May, with an involuntary shiver. That white, intent look, that vision, sensible of some horror to which May herself was blind, tried her nerves. 'Alan, does she see anything?'

'What is it, Catherine?'

Intelligence, recognition coming slowly back to the blank eyes, seemed to receive a fresh impetus from his voice. The momentarily suspended life and understanding returned with awful vividness to her expression. Whatever had been the nature of that brief experience it was frightfully intense.

The gaze that saw evidently what the others could not see was lifted with strange meaning to Alan's face, then faded in sudden physical exhaustion. She sank back upon the pillows with an indistinct exclamation. Bending over

her they distinguished but two words,—‘the ring!’

Surely their ears must have deceived them; starting back they looked with awful speechless glances into each other’s eyes. Had each been equally deceived by her faint muttering?

All was still during that silent questioning, save Catherine’s sobbing breath. An ineffable chill and consternation took possession of May’s heart. The first to break that horrible pause, Alan Valery leaned over the bed.

‘What is it, Catherine?’ His voice, unnatural at the beginning, grew steady as he went on. ‘Bring me some water, May.’ He administered it with a firm hand. ‘Were you frightened? Was it a pain? What was it, Catherine?’

Strength partially reviving, she drew herself away as far as possible from them both.

‘You suffocate me,—I can’t breathe.’

‘She wants more air,—one person can manage her best,—Alan, go!’

The last words were uttered in a whisper of terrified entreaty. Turning to her he shook his head with a look of warning and determination. He had judged his position more correctly than she could, and habitual dissimulation gave him, in his power of self-command, a confidence she could not have.

‘Did you see a ghost, Catherine?’ he asked in a tone of half-bantering solicitude.

She did not answer, but opened her eyes suddenly upon May.

‘Ring for Owen,—don’t go till she comes,—and then take him away,—don’t go till she comes!’

‘Ring for Owen, dear,’ repeated Alan calmly, as May stood motionless, stricken to the heart by that reiterated injunction not to go till Owen came, interpreting it as an entreaty not to leave Alan in the room alone. ‘Ring for her! Catherine, you have quite frightened May. Some more water?’

She thrust the glass aside with a violence that nearly dashed it from his hand. ‘No!’ Then a strange sudden effort at self-control checked her voice.

‘No, thank you,—only fetch Owen,—Owen will know what to do. Leave me with her. I am better.’ But in significant contrast with that laboured calm burst out at last the eager, terrified request, ‘May, are you there? May, don’t go!’

‘I am not going,’ said May, faintly.

Turning from the bed Alan drank off the water remaining in the glass.

‘A very strange attack!’ he said, as he set it softly down.

Not half so strange in May's eyes as the self-possession which he displayed. She, with her limbs failing under her, her heart standing still with terror in her breast, a tongue that lent itself with utmost difficulty to an untruth, beheld with amazement his courage, his ready dissimulation, his power to make those pale lips speak without faltering in their deceitful task.

Nevertheless his strength was failing him. He rang the bell violently for Owen, and behind the shadow of the curtains May saw that he poured out repeated draughts of water, and even examined hurriedly the phials on the table, as if he thought he might in some of them find wine.

The lady's-maid appearing, alarmed and out of breath, he prepared to leave the room.

'Let me know presently how your mistress is,' he said to Owen, after bidding Catherine a good night, to which she would not respond. Outside the room he found that May was following, and turned sharply round.

'No, no, you must stay,—you must keep her in check,—go back.'

'Shall I?'

She had caught hold of his hand; heart and limbs were failing her, everything but

love. She would have gone back at his bidding, but he felt that she trembled and was very cold.

‘Perhaps it would not be safe,’ he said, perceiving this. ‘She will not talk, I suppose. If she does the woman’s a fool and will not understand.’

A little farther on May’s bedroom door stood open, the candles already lit within it sending out a gleam of light on to the gallery floor, and by a simultaneous impulse they turned their steps in that direction. A door opened beside them as they passed, and a voice asked—

‘Caterina is not ill?’

May, with her hand in Alan’s, felt a strong shudder, a tremor more distinct even than her own—the effect as she supposed of surprise upon his harassed nerves—pass over him at the sudden question, though by the tone she instantly recognised Ragagni. Alan did not speak, and she answered for him—

‘She has been ill, but she is better.’

The door closed, and she drew Alan into her own room. There standing in the light, the consternation for which there was no words was again acknowledged by their encountering eyes. Alan spoke first.

‘She has guessed something—only a guess.

‘How could she guess?’

‘I don’t know. God is against me!’

‘She cannot be sure of anything, Alan,’ said May, better able to soothe the fears of others than to conceal her own. ‘Guesses will not do much harm.’

‘Will it not break my heart that she should hate me?’ he asked, with the bitter impatience of great suffering. So bitter was his voice, so passionate and stern his look, May did not dare reply, or offer consolation such as she might give, for that lost love. This grief was too great, too largely mixed even yet with jealousy and wrath to be within the power of her sympathy to touch. So they both felt, and after a few silent minutes Alan turned to go.

‘Not a word to Ragagni of this new suspicion, May!’ he said warningly. Then her pale wistful face penetrated for a moment through all the deadness to external things of that passion of sorrow. He came back and kissed her, giving an instant’s thought to the alarm she was enduring for his sake.

‘When we can think of it calmly, May, perhaps we shall find the danger is not much increased. There is no communication between

those who suspect. It may only be a fancy. At any rate be brave.'

When he was gone, May, all the more desolate for that brief flash of tenderness, sought mercy of that God who seemed to fight against her brother's cause.

CHAPTER V.

OF the troubles of that winter Philip Lucas had not been without his share. His perceptions were not keen, nor could he have defined the exact nature of the alteration that had taken place, but he was uneasily sensible that May Valery no longer was for him what May Valery had been.

The change was very subtle—very fluctuating in extent; sometimes assuming the proportions of a real grievance, distant manners, and intentional reserve. But before he could fix upon it, demand explanation, or administer reproof, it would alter its character, perhaps, to simple sadness, a depression which it made him anxious to perceive, but which he could hardly call an injury to himself. Then, again, from time to time—for May's natural cheerfulness could not easily be crushed, nor was she incapable of putting aside for a brief space

consideration of the approaching evil day—she would seem to his watchful but not penetrating vision so entirely the same as she had always been, that a change, of which he had yesterday been sure, was remembered as more probably the work of his own fancy than any substantial alteration in May.

A woman of keen wits, like May, had many devices for evading direct explanation with Philip Lucas, notwithstanding his profound conviction that plain and honest speaking was the wisest remedy for misunderstandings between friends and an invincible resource for the discomfiture of foes. She had expended great skill in rendering useless this favourite weapon of Philip's choice, and in restraining within the limits of a vague uneasiness, by careful adaptation of manner to the humour of the moment, a feeling which, if once allowed the strengthening exercise of speech, would have precipitated the painful crisis she desired to delay.

For some time, however, May had acknowledged to herself, with a sick heart, that this course could no longer rightly be maintained. She felt the dreaded trouble to be hard at hand. Ragagni was no longer the sole and safe possessor of that secret whose promulgation would

bring death to her brother, degradation to every one who bore his name. Dangers were thickening—Catherine's suspicions, unspoken though they were, had been indubitably aroused,—May was moving in a guilty atmosphere, tainted through sympathy with the criminal by the shadow of the crime.

Ever wider, between her lover and herself, had grown the gulf of which he was unconscious, widening as the darkness deepened over that brother to whose fate she clung. Compelling herself to look at matters as they really were, she felt the peril of discovery to be very great, and for Philip's sake, that he might not be, however distantly, involved in the family disgrace, as for her own, that, when it came, he might acquit her of all selfishness in her love, the breaking of their engagement could not much longer be delayed. She had not yet the courage, herself, to take decisive measures to accomplish the inevitable sacrifice. But she desisted with a sort of listlessness of despair from those manœuvres of a fainting spirit whereby explanations, undesirable only so long as it was her object to gain time, had been successfully avoided.

The change of which Philip had for months been dimly conscious, never by any interpreted

aright, became apparent even to other eyes than his; and then, strange to say, hesitation, shrinking from conversations that might prove decisive, appeared upon the other side. Philip Lucas shrank from his favourite remedy of plain speaking as might a patient from the knife, which, nevertheless, he knows alone can cure. With an indignant wonder, he found himself afraid to test the truth of the forebodings that had long been growing up.

In this doubtful state stood matters between him and May when Catherine first required his advice concerning the unreasonable demands her husband was making on her purse.

‘He takes your money!’ said Philip, gazing down at Catherine in amazement.

He could not conceive how Alan should be in want of money, and having never in his own mind invested him with a husband’s rights, was affected with wonder at finding them so extensively assumed, while he would have backed his cousin Catherine to maintain independent control over her fortune against all the world.

‘During the last three months he has had from me upwards of six hundred pounds.’

‘What has he done with it?’

‘That,’ said Catherine, with a suspicious

and resentful air, 'I should be very glad to know.'

In emergencies Philip had no very swift command of words. He got up, crossing over to the mantelpiece—still, though there was no fire, his favourite position—wearing an abstracted look.

'Debts!' he suggested presently. 'Has he any debts?'

'I never heard of any.'

'No proof, that, that he has incurred none.'

'Does it not strike you as very strange?' said Catherine, watching him as he stood facing her.

'I can't say it does, not so very—' then he checked himself, finishing mentally the sentence thus begun, expressing too unfavourable an estimate of Alan Valery to be addressed to Alan Valery's wife, though that wife was Catherine.

'Not strange!' Catherine's voice rose with marked decision; '*I* think it very strange, and most indefensible; I am amazed that no one else should see the matter in its proper light. Do you justify it, Philip?'

'Justify it? No, certainly! He would have done better to tell you what it is wanted for. Depend upon it the foolish boy was in debt

before he married.' There was a world of vexation in his tone that Catherine should ever have married a foolish boy.

'Some sort of claim, perhaps?' suggested Catherine with a peculiar look.

'Well, exactly, a claim for money. Not absolutely debts of his own incurring, did you mean? He may have put his name to bills—stood security for some one—there's no saying. Yet I should almost have given him credit for taking better care of his own interest.'

'Or perhaps some folly, or ——,' she stopped suddenly short. 'What shall I do, Philip?'

'Follies enough, I dare say!' said Philip. 'Do? what can you do? The money is as clean gone by this time as if you had thrown it into the sea.'

'But for the future?'

'You don't expect that he will make fresh demands?'

'I never expected the first,' said Catherine, 'but now I have very little doubt that he will go on, as he has begun.'

Philip thoughtfully caressed his tawny beard.

'Six hundred pounds,' he exclaimed in a sort of inward voice, 'and no account given, eh, Catherine?'

‘Absolutely refused.’

Her tone was very quiet. Throughout the conversation she had manifested a composure which her cousin would not have expected her to display. He thought her illness must have cowed her, or else that Alan Valery had proved a stronger master for her imperious will than could have been foreseen.

‘I don’t know what you can do, Catherine,’ he said, after pausing momentarily upon that consideration. ‘The danger is, you see, in your husband being so young, and consequently, in all probability, so inexperienced. Yet I can’t counsel you not to give. I don’t see how you can help yourself. But it is very strange conduct on his part, I must say.’

Catherine let the subject drop with the same peculiar calm which had characterised her manner from the first. Philip supposed she must be physically incapable of excitement.

‘Do you gain strength, Catherine?’

‘I think I do.’

‘Where’s May this morning?’

‘She went out with her brother and my cousin Ragagni some time ago.’

Upon that there followed a pause. Philip’s gaze fell gloomily to the ground.

‘Catherine, I’m uneasy about May,’ he said abruptly, after a while.

‘Are you?’ A little smile, compassion too much mixed with scorn to be consoling, curled Catherine’s lips.

Philip looked hard at her, but could not quite understand what she meant.

‘I have been dissatisfied,’ he repeated, ‘for some time past.’

‘Have you?’ said Catherine again.

‘You mean that you have too?’ he asked, with perceptible impatience of her manner.

‘Dissatisfied! I’m not her lover. But I have often wondered, Philip, that you were not a little annoyed.’

‘Is she ill?’ said Philip in a tone of anxiety, which it was well for May she could not hear.

‘Certainly not. But I think she is uncomfortable.’

‘There is not the least good in inuendoes,’ said Philip with irritation forcibly repressed. ‘What is the matter with her? There has been a growing change now for many months.’

‘I should be more sorry for you, Philip, if I thought more highly than I do of May,’ answered Catherine. ‘But she is just a silly changeable child. She is flattered by the

notice she receives. For the moment she is tired of her engagement.'

'No!' exclaimed Philip. It was an indignant protest, not an expression of surprise.

Then, as sometimes happened when something decisive had been said, Catherine grew a little alarmed at the scope and possible effect of her assertion.

'That at least is my impression,' she added hurriedly; 'I have observed a difference in her behaviour to you and in her behaviour generally. But it may not be that.'

'You must wrong her, I believe you must wrong her grievously,' said Philip, defending May from the charge of fickle change—a very serious charge to him—as much against his own suspicions as Catherine's accusation. 'Why should she alter her mind now? We have been engaged more than a year—eighteen months. Half the time we were to wait!'

'But the difference we both remark in her has not been recent, whatever be the cause.'

'No more it has. Still, I cannot understand—You said something about her being flattered, influenced by notice—of course you could not mean the notice of anybody in particular?'

'O, no,' said Catherine with more energy than truth. Something had changed the reso-

lution not long ago expressed to May, and she had grown afraid of exciting jealousy even in Philip Lucas.

Satisfied or not by the denial, he did not seek its repetition. There came another and a longer pause.

‘Well, I’ll go now, Catherine,’ he said at last. ‘I must find out how matters really stand from May herself. She won’t be in yet, I suppose, and besides——I’ll come over to-morrow.’

‘You must not mention my name,’ said Catherine in haste.

‘There’ll be no occasion whatever.’

He went away looking unusually severe in his perturbation and dismay. Catherine’s note of alarm had chimed in with all the uneasy suggestions of six months’ uncertainty and fear. And such was the effect, that to other consternation was added an immense disgust at finding he was not the man he had believed himself to be. The idea that May was weary of him inflicted a deeper wound upon his heart than he thought any freak of fortune should inflict. He had considered the possibility of her affection so calmly that it angered and confused him to perceive he could not with any such composure face its loss.

He could not help himself, however. His love was tenderer, more self-asserting than he had thought, and the first touch of separation brought out at once its own inherent weakness and its power over him. He might preserve his erect and stately carriage, and hold his features rigidly unmoved, as he paced down the avenue of Bellair. But he could not stay with a resolution the smarting of the wound he thus concealed.

Slowly along under the trees which had witnessed Alan Valery's fiercer passion, he took his way with an absent onward look, that underwent a momentary change as three figures entered upon his field of vision—Alan Valery foremost, walking languidly alone, May side by side with Ragagni a little way behind.

Before Philip came up with any of them, Alan turning off among the trees escaped a meeting which he always regarded with dislike. The other two remained unconscious of Mr. Lucas' approach till he was quite close. Then he had the mortification of seeing a startled shrinking look vary for a moment the settled anxiety of May's face.

Ragagni spoke to him composedly, and without any special address to May, Philip turned and walked beside them. As he entered into

conversation with Ragagni, May presently fell a little behind. Ragagni's intention evidently was, however, to follow the path which Alan Valery had chosen, and leaving him Philip went back, although with no display of haste, to May.

He was not in any haste. He hoped little from explanation with her, and yet hoped enough to shrink, unworthily as he thought, from a course which might render hope impossible any more. Nevertheless, if he went forward slowly on this course it was with none the less determination.

'Don't go in yet,' he said as he rejoined her. 'Let us walk about a little in the shade.'

'I have had my walk,' said May, turning nevertheless.

'We will find a place to sit down, if you are tired.'

On one side the single row of avenue trees was backed by a sort of copse or thicket, shadowy and cool. Two or three little tracks intersected it, into one of which they struck, till Philip found a pleasant seat at the foot of a tall ash, where both sat down.

They did not speak at first. May had avoided him so much of late that Philip was disposed to put an interpretation unfavourable

to his wishes upon this easy granting of an opportunity for some such explanation as she must feel to be inevitable. The explanation involved so much, that whilst, resolute to attempt it, he was yet willing to delay the opening words—even to bestow unwonted consideration in determining what they should be.

May, growing nervous in that waiting silence, spoke first.

‘Captain Mann is dead,’ she said with startling abruptness.

Philip turned hastily.

‘Dead?’

‘The younger one, I mean. He died last night.’

‘I declare I thought you meant the other! Well, as he must have died, poor fellow, the sooner for him the better, perhaps,’ said Philip compassionately. ‘It will hardly be a very great grief to the old people, will it?’

‘They feel it a good deal,’ answered May. ‘Poor old Captain Mann was terribly shocked.’

‘May, do you know why I have brought you here?’ asked Philip suddenly, with abruptness equal to her own.

‘Because it is a pleasant spot, I suppose.’

‘Not only for that.’ And then the more

harshly, for the galling consciousness of an anxiety he thought humiliatingly strong, he began, 'I have a complaint to make against you, May.'

'If that was the reason, I wish you had not brought me here at all. I do not like listening to complaints, or people who make them.'

'Nevertheless you must listen to me now, May. This is no foolish unreasonable lover's jealousy.' The more he feared inwardly that it was, the more he sought by a stern manner to give his intentions another character in his own eyes.

She foresaw all that was coming. A sigh she could not wholly stifle escaped her lips. He looked at her with severe gravity.

'You should not find it so difficult to hear me, May.'

'I am tired, Philip,' she said, shrinking like a coward from immediate sacrifice. 'Don't you see how tired I am?'

It was an unwise challenge, exposing her to closer scrutiny than she could then calmly bear. Tears of impatient pain gathered under his gaze. She got up suddenly from the grass.

'In a few minutes the luncheon bell will ring. Keep your scolding for another day.'

‘No,’ he said, rising too, ‘that is hardly likely, when at this minute you are giving me fresh cause to wonder and be displeased. You have avoided me, May; you have behaved to me as I have given you no provocation to behave. I must speak plainly. You have changed your manners to me after a fashion to which I altogether object.’

His own manner at the moment, if not passionate, was at least extremely rough. May did not immediately reply. She stood with her face turned from him, swinging her hat, which she had taken off in the shade, mechanically in her hand.

‘I can’t help it,’ she said at last, in a low suffocated voice.

‘But it is absurd to say that. This alteration which I have long observed in you cannot be involuntary. I have given you no cause to treat me with less affection than before. Can you say that I have? Have I grieved you—offended you—disappointed you in any way?’

Reproach rose higher in each demand—protests of a regard for her whose real though undemonstrated tenderness he only condemned as almost too engrossing for a man of sense.

‘What have I done, May, that you must cease to treat me as you did at first?’

‘Nothing. Philip, you torture me!’

In that involuntary outcry May’s weakness spent itself and passed, the sound of her own voice thus breaking passionately forth, startled her back into apparent calm.

‘Philip,’ she said, suddenly changing her tone before surprise had suffered a reply to that first unlooked-for appeal, and instantaneously obliterating its effect. ‘You are hard, you don’t make the allowances which you should make. Human beings are not like pieces of machinery, always wound up to the same pitch. They will vary. They cannot always be the same.’

‘Not in health, perhaps, or spirits. But unless they are reprehensibly weak and foolish in purpose they should be the same.’

‘I have often remarked, Philip, that to you obstinacy appears perfection.’

‘No, May; but I disapprove of fickleness—causeless change.’

‘So do I, just as much. So, then, there we are agreed. Let us go into luncheon. Have you seen Catherine?’

Her strength had failed. The great sacrifice

she thought need not be made to-day. 'Let us go in,' she said, only anxious to escape a conversation, every word of which was pain.

But she had not been self-possessed enough to choose the best way. Philip saw in her behaviour a frivolity that did not please.

'This is trifling,' he said, with all the sternness of his brusque voice and authoritative manner, 'childishness, you ought to be aware, is out of place in such a conversation as this ——'

She turned upon him before he could complete the sentence, and the expression of her face was so entirely new that he stopped short. It was a pale, desperate look, that on any features less delicate and soft than hers would have been almost fierce. Passionately her heart rebelled against the cruel perversity that drove her on to a renunciation, terrible for both.

'Philip, do you want to quarrel with me?'

Involuntarily he drew a little back. She had revealed herself to him in an utterly unexpected character. Had he altogether then misunderstood her amiable and yielding ways? Was there in this serene and cheerful creature such a spirit as even Catherine could not boast? Was she, indeed, a true Valery after all?

He was bewildered by a change whose right interpretation he was not keen enough to see.

‘I never wish to quarrel, May.’

‘Then don’t torment me any more to-day. Let us go in; let us go and walk; let us do anything you like rather than talk as we have been talking. Which way shall we go?’ She pushed back from her forehead the studied waves of hair, completing thus her transformation, and fanned herself hastily with her hat. There was a breeze stirring in the leaves overhead, but she felt out of breath and faint.

Philip watched her for a moment without reply.

‘We had better not go anywhere together,’ he answered after a pause, and with regretful dignified severity; ‘I could not readily turn to another subject of conversation than that we were upon. I should have much preferred to say whatever more there is to be said now, before we parted, but it may be wisest to delay as you propose.’

Leaving her in anger was distasteful to him. His voice softened as he held out his hand.

‘Next time we must try to understand each other better.’

She rather let him take than gave her own,

and it fell listlessly when the support of his grasp was withdrawn.

She listened without answering to his farewell words. When he was gone she sat down again under the tree, holding herself in a certain rigid stillness, and gazing down the path with fixed, blank eyes. Several minutes passed before the inward passion burst through this strange restraint. Then she bent herself suddenly down upon the grass and moss with the prostration and abandonment of despair.

‘ Could he not see my heart was breaking?’

CHAPTER VI.

It was now nearly two years since the fruitless quest after Varese's murderer had been begun. And now, at last, upon the growing darkness of all those months that had thrown round every circumstance connected with the mysterious crime, the additional mystery, the haze of distance—almost of oblivion, one gaze at least perceived the breaking of a light. Catherine's inextinguishable belief that she had seen the ring before it was dug up in Philip's field had been confirmed by a sudden flash of recollection.

Long ago, just as far back as the night of Geronimo Varese's death, a hand had been extended to her, which she had neglected or declined to take. And it was on that hand she had seen the ring, the very same which in repulsing her husband's late attempt at reconciliation she had once again refused to touch.

Certainty there was none, but suspicion irresistibly strong arose, that the undiscoverable criminal, who, in taking a life to her so precious, had spoiled her own, had afterwards dared to make himself the companion of that wretched and marred existence whose future, in that case, could but be full of tragic consequences for him and her.

Whether it was a real recollection, or a fatal fancy, for once imagining a truth, that had dawned in Catherine's mind, it was impossible to tell. She did not herself receive it at the moment with perfect faith. But the idea once suggested grew hourly more plausible and more clear. The reward of her labour, the accomplishment of her one great hope was perhaps within her reach.

And now, if ever Catherine had looked upon herself as the victim of an adverse fate, surely her belief was justified. Strange perils, awful duties, hatreds the most intense, gathered about her daily life. Never had any woman occupied a position more terrible in every way than hers. Fearfully and unexpectedly had come at last the opportunity for that long sought and eagerly desired revenge which was to do Varese honour in his grave.

She had no love for Alan Valery, she had never had any. Her condescending kindness for him had lessened with the daily contact of their married life, with the experience of his inability to satisfy her wayward heart, his gloomy temper, and occasional determination to assert the superior power of his own will. No grief, albeit a sick horror, took possession of her when she suspected in him the malefactor for whose bloody footsteps she had searched so long. She felt an awful amazement, a shuddering reluctance, an invincible loathing of him, and weak womanly terror for herself. But she was spared the anguish inevitable to May upon the recognition of his guilt—she had no love to be shaken, no esteem to be destroyed. There was not—no, not for a moment—any faltering in the course she had pursued before she guessed the near connection of the criminal with herself. She thought she had a fearful destiny; the justice which she had devoted herself to obtain assumed in her eyes some of the grim and austere colours it had worn to others, but not for an instant did she think of drawing back her hand.

Nevertheless, she suffered. Unless a terrible delusion possessed her, in giving herself

to a boy whom she aspired to rule, she had put herself in the power of a man cunning and cruel, most violent, most treacherous. She had rewarded her lover's murderer with everything she could bestow—except, indeed, the heart that was ever faithful to the dead. This was Catherine's grief, so far as any grief at all was occasioned by the thought of Alan's guilt.

And yet it would be wrong to say she had no pity. Pity for him, as he now was, she certainly had none. But looking back over the brief years of his manhood, to the old days when as a boy he constituted himself her true knight and slave, she was susceptible of some faint compassion for the Alan Valery of that time. That very compassion was, nevertheless, itself a proof how little mercy she had for him now. His life then had been innocent and happy. The remembrance affected her by contrast with the dismal close which it might possibly have become her lot to hasten on.

Conviction of his guilt was not received without many struggles. The whole position, if it should be true, became terrible enough to make her shrink from recognising it as fact, without the help of any tenderness for him. She tried by a reasonable and calm considera-

tion to distinguish between truth and imagination—as if it was in her nature to be reasonable—as if it was a subject on which she ever could be calm. Then when she could not stifle her suspicion, she beheld in it a light from heaven—a light to walk by, if not one in which she could rejoice.

All along she had had what she called ‘a feeling’ that she had seen the ring before. There appeared to her something almost miraculous in the constancy with which she had adhered to the idea, at first so faint as to seem mere fancy, even to herself—something providential in Alan Valery’s repetition of the very same act which had at first, unconsciously till the eventful moment came, attracted her attention to what was now the unmistakeable token of his guilt.

Very little caution was natural to Catherine’s character, but circumstances combined to engraft it now upon the alien stem. Personal alarm had silenced her almost in the first confusing consternation of her discovery. From the instant her suspicion was aroused she felt for her husband an enormous dread. She saw in him not only violence but craft, all human pity, all honourable truth sacrificed to mercenary motives the most base.

If she had entertained for him any regard, she might, recalling his passionate jealousy, have ascribed his crime to ill-regulated disappointed love operating upon such a temper as she knew him to possess; but she had none, not even the most faint. It had been all, whatever she had felt, washed out in weariness, obliterated by the resentment which his recent conduct had aroused. She believed him to have hated in Varese, the successful candidate not for her heart, but for her fortune. She saw in him the vilest, the least excusable of criminals, to whose greed of gold she owed the destruction of all her happiness. The natural consequence of such an estimate, after such a discovery, was personal fear. She also might be an obstacle in his path. If he became aware of her suspicions her life would appear incompatible with his, and she believed him capable of crushing her without remorse.

Well enough she knew her assurance that it was on his hand she had seen the fatal ring would go no further with Philip Lucas or Ragagni than the 'feeling' which had been pronounced the working of a fanciful brain by both. Even she could not look upon her suspicion as proof, and to others it would have

far less force than to herself. Silence and vigilance were her best course. Henceforward she also had a secret. She smothered her loathing, endeavoured to conceal her terror, tried more than once to believe the whole was a delusion. But the madness, if such it were, only gained ground, filling her with horror and despair, and prompting her to a ceaseless watch, a relentless tracking of her husband, of which he was far more plainly conscious than she had any idea.

As soon as she was able to go out, almost before she was rightly able, she made her first independent attempt at investigation. It did not seem to promise much, but it might do something—she did not say to herself to prove Alan's guilt—but something one way or the other to prove or to disprove. She toiled down through the park in the hot July afternoon, when Alan was closeted with Ragagni, and May was in the town endeavouring to console the Manns for their late loss, to the house occupied by her husband and his sister at the time of Varese's death.

She had made the same journey, a month later, two years ago. More than once she thought of it as she went slowly down to the

little postern, along the path where she had then lingered, full of a jealous misery that yet, in itself, acknowledged a chance of happiness, possible no more.

The only hope that animated her now was that of finding the husband to whom she had always been indifferent, at any rate no mercenary assassin, in marrying whom she had herself been made to recompense her lover's death, and in whose power her very life might not be safe. And this hope could not be very precious, as contradicting the other and chief object of her existence, to discover the criminal, and procure his punishment.

With slow and weary feet she mounted the steps, and passing the now untenanted verandah knocked at the door. It was opened by the ancient retainer of the Valerys to whom the house belonged.

'Mrs. Valery—ma'am!' with a low courtsey, and a stare of surprise. Mrs. Roll had more caresses than courtesies for May, and a lecturing tenderness for Alan; but Alan's wife was a great lady, and required different treatment.

'Have you any lodgers just at present?' asked Catherine abruptly. In general she had a pleasant manner to inferiors who dis-

played due respect, but Mrs. Roll's connection with the Valerys was not in her favour.

'No, ma'am, not at present. Our ladies left last Thursday.'

'I wish to see the rooms,' said Catherine. Mrs. Roll admitted her, marvelling a little in her heart. Mrs. Valery, in the days when she was called Miss Mayhew, had been in the house often enough when she came to visit May, and must, one would have thought, be pretty well acquainted with its proportions. However, she was welcome to look at them, the more so as perhaps she might be desirous of doing so on behalf of friends. Catherine just glanced at the little sitting-room, and in the front bedchamber, only seemed to pause from sheer fatigue, dropping into a chair.

'You have another room?' she said, 'one at the back, where Mr. Valery used to sleep?'

'Yes, ma'am; one a little smaller than this. This is a very pleasant room, and a nice view out of window.'

'May's room,' said Catherine musingly, as she looked round.

Mrs. Roll then gathered courage to inquire after Mr. Valery and the dear little lady, endeavouring to propitiate her visitor by express-

ing at the same time extreme solicitude for the well-being of the new-born heir.

'He is very well, thank you,' answered Catherine, softening momentarily, as Mrs. Roll had ventured to hope. Then face and manner hardened once more as she added, 'Mr. Valery is much the same. He considers himself a great invalid. Miss May is quite well. Show me the other room.'

Ushered into the bedchamber that had been Alan's, she excited fresh surprise by gazing about her with a long and curious stare.

'Where does that door lead?' she asked, pointing to another than that by which they had come in.

'Into a dressing closet, ma'am,' said Mrs. Roll, throwing it open as she spoke. 'But 't isn't furnished you see, ma'am; 'tis full of boxes and such like.'

'I see,' said Catherine.

Then she sat down again by the window, looking out into the garden almost level with the room. She could easily have got down into it from where she was, but egress was prevented by iron bars.

'Are these necessary?' she asked, putting her hand on one.

‘They didn’t use to be there,’ answered Mrs. Roll, ‘but I’d a party here for the winter months who wouldn’t sleep in this room without there was bars. So then I was forced to put ’em up.’

‘What is beyond the garden?’

‘Just a field, ma’am, and then the high road.’

Catherine rose up.

‘I suppose you wouldn’t let me see the garden?’ she said, growing suddenly gracious.

‘To be sure, ma’am! But there ain’t much to see.’

‘Will you bide awhile and rest?’ said Mrs. Roll, lapsing into the manner generally reserved for May; ‘you look but poorly yet, ma’am.’

But Catherine was eager to see the garden, and, marvelling anew, Mrs. Roll led her thither through the back yard. It was a small mean place, and why Mrs. Valery, who had such splendid gardens of her own, should care to examine it, she could not conceive. Nevertheless Catherine did examine it minutely, toiling with slow and feeble footsteps round the little inclosure.

‘A door!’ she exclaimed suddenly, stopping

opposite that leading to the field. Mrs. Roll wondered at her curiosity about doors. 'Yes, ma'am! tis always locked, that door.'

'Always?'

'It hasn't been opened this ten year. Not since master and miss was children, and had a fancy to have their tea in that there field beyond.'

Catherine raised herself on tiptoe to look over the wall.

'A very low wall,' she said half aloud; 'I think your lodgers were right in having bars put to that window. Before, I suppose, a person could easily have got out of the window, and so over the wall without disturbing anyone in the house?'

Unwittingly Catherine betrayed her thoughts by speaking as if the danger to be prevented was from within rather than without. But Mrs. Roll was little likely to take notice of this turn of phrase.

'Mr. Alan have a done it scores of times,' she answered, waiting Mrs. Valery's pleasure with her hand held up to keep the afternoon sunlight from her eyes. Catherine's face was turned away examining the ivy, and her chilly nature, perhaps, did not dislike the warmth.

‘I suppose your ivy sometimes gets torn down?’

‘Tore down, ma’am!’ was the puzzled reply.

‘Tis cut pretty reg’lar and kep close.’

‘Torn down by the wind, or people getting over the wall.’

‘Lor, ma’am, people don’t never come getting over my wall!’ exclaimed Mrs. Roll in hasty horror; ‘I should be afraid of my life to sleep o’ nights if I thought they did. I never knowed nobody do it but Master Alan, when he was younger and stronger, poor dear young gentleman!’

‘When he was with you last?’

‘Well, ma’am, I told ’im not, for I didn’t like the thoughts of it. But I daresay he did. I did find the ivy a tore once.’

‘When?’ asked Catherine, with a persistent curiosity, as she pulled off the leaves, that wearied Mrs. Roll.

‘The day after he was gone, I think ’twas. But there was the very terriblest gale all night, and may be ’twas the wind then. Shall I fetch a chair for you, ma’am? Ben’t the sun a little too hot?’

‘A little,’ said Catherine, also sheltering her face with her hand. ‘No, don’t fetch a chair,

you shall give me your arm down to the house, presently. You see I am not very strong.'

'I seed that when first you came,' responded Mrs. Roll.

Then she thankfully supported her visitor out of the little broiling garden back to May's tenderly remembered parlour, shaded by the verandah, and cool with the breeze that came up from a dancing sea.

Mrs. Roll dropped a word in praise of her lodgings, and named her moderate terms as Catherine sat resting, her veil pulled down over her face, and her fingers plaiting with strange vehemence the fringes of her cloak. Lodgers for Mrs. Roll were as far as possible from her thoughts, and she took no notice of either terms or room. When at last she rose up it was with the same abruptness that had characterised her whole proceeding.

'I am obliged to you, Mrs. Roll, for your trouble, I'll step out through the window. It's the shorter way,' and so without any word about providing occupants for the apartments which she had been viewing, she went her way, leaving behind her the impression that Mr. Alan's wife was a wayward and troublesome lady, however she might be rich.

CHAPTER VII.

It was not often that Lynnwater aroused itself from its mortal lethargy to take interest in the affairs of Captain and Mrs. Mann. Even the peculiar fashion of Mrs. Mann's attire had become so familiar as often to escape the notice of a smile. The death of the younger captain, however, and the consequently uncertain destination of a fortune declared by popular rumour to be considerable, provoked some little speculation, and a few indifferent guesses.

General opinion pointed unanimously to one or both the Valerys, the sole surviving relations of the ancient couple, as the most probable successors to the dead nephew's place in the will. The decision of Lynnwater upon the question was, that May would get the largest share, and Alan would come in for something. But at Bellair, and wherever Manns and

Valerys were at all intimately known, it was believed that, though May's chance was probably a very good one, her brother would have none. May would one day no doubt be very rich; but Alan Valery was an object of detestation to the Manns, and most unlikely to have the handling of a single sixpence that ever had been theirs.

May, whose prospects were thus brilliant, took less interest in the ultimate destination of her guardians' wealth than any person in Lynnwater. Had the probability of succession been immediate, she would very likely have appeared avariciously eager, for she knew her brother was again in want of money. A fresh demand addressed to Catherine had just met with obstinate refusal. He would not desist for that, she believed, but Catherine might prove resolute, and in any case the applying to her at all was almost intolerable to May's conscience and her pride. Her being named as Captain Mann's heir would not, however, as far as she could see, do Alan any good. She would have no command over money as long as they lived—not even over her own little portion, dexterously tied up under their safe keeping. She was helpless. All she had to do was to suffer.

This part of her destiny, indeed, she thought she was now fulfilling to the utmost. She accused herself of selfishness, of lacking sympathy with Alan, so strong a hold had the pressure of her individual sorrow at this time upon her heart. For several days after her last interview with Philip she had lived in terror of his return to renew the interrupted conversation, when she knew it would be folly and cowardice any longer to delay a renunciation she must make.

However he did not come, and at the end of a week she received a note from him. It was very kind, very forbearing; there was even an admission, betraying how much too strong his heart was for the indifference he arrogated, that when he last saw her he might have been unnecessarily stern. There was no such advance as May had half dreaded and half hoped to find, towards releasing her from an engagement which he evidently thought she did not exactly know how to fulfil. The cruel sacrifice must be made entirely by her. But she perceived by the tone of the letter that he considered matters to have come between them to a serious and unsatisfactory state.

And so—and Philip's slow deliberate caution rather than any weakness manifested itself

here—he thought it well to let a little time elapse before he saw her again, and entered upon the conversation that would then have to be resumed. He happened to have business in London, and was going up for a few days. She was not, he added forgivingly, with that superior bearing he always assumed towards her, and which in no way derogated from the real tenderness of his regard, to take this as any sign of anger. He did not like to be betrayed into hasty speech, and wished therefore to recover the self-command which his last interview with her had somewhat shaken.

The signature was neither more nor less affectionate than usual. Philip's love letters were always much after the fashion of his words—sincere, but just a little rough. He was guilty of no inconsistency in saying he disliked hasty speech, indicating thereby not the reckless honesty which he made matter of conscience, but the result of agitation and excitement, such as he utterly despised. To May the letter appeared wanting in no one particular. And instead of rebelling against its long suffering tone, she acknowledged it with a pang of tender gratitude and vain

remorse for the pain she had inflicted, the worse pain she must inflict.

She said nothing to anyone about the note till Philip's prolonged absence began to be remarked. Catherine, when parting from him last, had been led to expect his return to Bellair next morning, on purpose to seek a decisive interview with May. Finding that he did not come, and that day after day went by without the ordinary visit, she suspected that some explanation must in fact have taken place, in consequence of which he might be anxious to avoid the house where May was staying for a time.

'What has become of Philip?' she said to her sister-in-law at last, as they sat together in the afternoon.

'Oh, didn't you know? He is in London for a few days.'

'In London!'

Catherine looked at her with curious eyes. A change was coming over her expression, and the gentle parted lips were growing pale and set.

'Without coming to say good-bye!' said Catherine again.

May rose up to sort and arrange a heap of

flowers she had brought in from the garden in her apron a few minutes before, standing for the purpose at a table rather farther than her former place from Catherine's chair.

'Or did he come over?' persisted Catherine.
'You saw him, I suppose, May?'

'He did not tell me he was going to London when I saw him; he told me of it in a note a few days ago. Have you a pair of common scissors there, with which I could cut the stalks?'

Catherine threw her a pair, watching her in silence as she bent over her occupation.

'When did you see him, then?' she asked after a few moments.

'I don't know, I'm sure,' answered May, abstractedly. 'About a fortnight ago.'

'And when did he write?'

'On Wednesday last.'

'You never said anything about it.'

'Didn't I?' said May, carefully clipping her stalks.

'The fact is, you've quarrelled with him, I suppose? Never mind those rubbishing flowers now, child!' exclaimed Catherine with impatience.

For a minute May did not answer; bending

over the rich red roses, the colouring of cheeks and lips seemed fading into absolute white.

‘Not a quarrel—exactly,’ she answered very slowly, after a pause.

Catherine returned to her embroidery.

‘I thought so!’ she said half aloud.

‘It is not a quarrel,’ repeated May.

An indescribable reluctance seized her to have it so considered; to find the separation she dreaded already accomplished in general belief.

‘It is not a quarrel, and you are not to imagine it is.’

‘Ah!’ said Catherine, ‘I happen to know more about it, young lady, than you think. May, you’re a fool. Philip is much the most domestic man of the two.’

‘The two!’ May’s eyes grew wonderfully wide and blank.

‘O, that’s nonsense! Are you deceitful, too? false—false as your brother!’ said Catherine, something of her inward thoughts transpiring momentarily. ‘As for that, one is as much my cousin as the other, and certainly Philip is no genius. But he’s the youngest, the best off, and infinitely the best looking.’

‘Do you imagine I’m in love with Ra-

gagni?' cried May, forgetting fear, grief, watchfulness, everything in sheer amaze.

'You know you are,' said Catherine, contemptuously.

'Upon my word, Catherine!' May turned back to her flowers, disarranging rather than arranging, her hands tremulous with speechless indignation. 'I wish I were Mrs. Mann,' she said at last, 'to answer you somewhat in your own style. However, as that would be impossible, what you've said is not true. In one sense I love your cousin Ragagni, but not in the way you mean.'

'You don't care about Philip?' said Catherine, half questioning, half asserting.

'I have talked too much to you of my affairs,' retorted May; 'I will never talk to you about them again. There are your scissors—thank you.'

She set the flower vases in their places, and went out of the room, full of astonishment at the accusation, passionately angry at the way in which it had been made.

'Mrs. Mann!' she said, 'Mrs. Mann is a queen to her!'

The hall door stood open as she passed towards the staircase. She turned and went down a few of the wide steps, that the cool

air might subdue the flush of indignation which had chased the paleness from her cheeks. Then she went down a few more, and thought of seeking in the gardens some shady solitude where she might soothe herself back into ordinary calm. But, she reflected, it was all Catherine's; this home, where her brother should be master, was only tolerant either of him or her. She wanted to forget Catherine, to carry those sorrows to which her insolence had added another sting away for a time from her and everything that was hers.

Coming back, she ran upstairs to her own room, and dressed herself for a walk. Then she set out, under the hot sun, for that pleasant green wilderness, the Rocks, which could very speedily be entered from Bellair.

It was for no particular reason that she chose that direction, save only that the place was solitary, and that under its luxuriant thickets, or great jutting stones, there would be shade. She went along blindly, and for anything else cared nothing where she went.

Her heart was very sore as well as very sad. Oppressed as she was with great and grievous trouble, it might seem odd that mere words, however rude, should have such power to annoy, especially as, in the Manns' house,

her ears had been inured to speech less delicate than strong. However that might be, they had wounded her, and she herself did not wonder that they had. It was that very consciousness of deeper suffering that made such additional pangs hard to bear, though in themselves they might be small.

When she had got down, disregarding damage to her light dress, through little tangled paths, to within a short distance of the descent, at whose feet lay the sea, she found a great stone to screen her from the sun, and seated herself on the short grass.

The spot was considerably lower down than that where she and Alan had rested just two years ago, when she had warned him of Varese's probable success. But the view was much the same, only between May's shelter and the sea were fewer thickets, narrower slopes. The close parched turf ran down, broken occasionally by a rugged white stone that cropped out here and there from the surface, with little intervening undulation to the summit of the cliffs. Below lay the water dancing in sunlight and rippled by a grateful breeze. A heavy looking cutter with tanned sails lay at anchor not far from shore. Between the vessel and the beach several rowing boats were slowly

plying filled with stone. All to the right were tangled underwood and green knolls alternating with sheer descents of lias and white chalk. To the left there was a glimpse of Lynnwater pier, and the long stretch of low scorched looking hills. Above all was the hot blue sky, upon everything the glare of a blinding summer sun.' May turned her face to the sea, resting her chin upon her hands. Thought was very painful now, but she must think.

As her indignation began to expend itself, she remembered with a chilling thrill of fear that momentary lifting of the curtain when Catherine in her anger charged her with being false—'false as your brother!' May understood the under-current of thought which had prompted the accusation. Neither she nor Alan had been re-assured by Catherine's silence as to the reason of her so-called strange attack. She was alarmed also to find her affection for Ragagni should have attracted a particular observation. Might not Catherine begin to search with dangerous curiosity for the real nature of the feeling with which she regarded him, since it was not love? May wished she could become insensible for a time, and cease to think.

As she sat motionless facing the sea, her hat

off, and the breeze playing strange tricks with her crisp wavy hair, footsteps approached her across the barren knolls, treading heavily and unevenly over the parched grass. Her head was sunk low between her hands; a few minutes before she had spread her fingers over her ears, to shut out the discordant bellowing of a cow not far off. It had not only jarred upon her hearing, but also affected her with some little unreasonable alarm, for she was always afraid of encountering cattle when alone. When the sound ceased, she had, through a certain listlessness, retained unchanged the same position, and was unconscious of anyone's approach.

‘Signorina! are you then all alone?’

May started and turned red. Then she remembered that Catherine’s ridiculous notion could not be entertained by this grave conspirator of eight-and-forty, to whom besides the foundation of her esteem was so well known, and was happy to feel the unusual colour die out of her cheeks.

‘Where have you come from?’ she said, with very little perceptible embarrassment. ‘Isn’t it pleasant here?’

Ragagni threw himself down beside her on the grass.

'I was higher up. From there I saw la signorina, who sat by herself. Here is a cold wind!'

'Delightful!' said May. Then she fell into her former attitude and absent stare at the stone boat rocking lazily upon the sunlit ripple.

'You are then melancholy thus?' observed Ragagni, after a time.

May roused herself and sat upright, with a sigh.

'Why then?' said Ragagni.

She answered him by a look, trustful, yet surprised.

'I intend,' he said; 'I understand.' Then, after a pause so long that she had all but forgotten his presence, he subjoined, 'Where, then, is gone that dear friend?'

'Oh! to London.'

'He will not return?'

May started, flushed faintly, and turned as if to inquire what he meant.

'Here,' said Ragagni, 'I intend it all; never would he marry himself to the sister of an assassin.'

May hid her face in her hands.

'Oh!' she cried, with painful shrinking, 'don't call Alan that!'

‘Of him we will not speak; but that other. Is it not true that which I say?’

‘Why should you say it?’ asked May, not resentfully, but as one in doubt.

‘Is it not true? He knows not that which we know. But well know you that if he did ——’

‘He will never be put to the test,’ May hastily interposed.

‘But if he was to be?’

Once more she interrupted him with an imploring gesture, turning to him with extended hands.

‘Dear friend, it is not necessary to speak of this; you should not speak of it to me. It is painful to me. It——’ she snatched back the hands he had cordially taken, to cover her face. He heard a long, thick sob. ‘Did I not tell you once,’ she said, looking up at last, with a dim smile trembling on her lips, ‘that I was so little and weak that I should never bear a great sorrow well?’

He watched her for a moment with his still, grave eyes, holding the little fingers she had given him once more somewhat loosely clasped. Then he said something indistinct, compassionate she thought; she could not quite tell.

He got up from his place and walked down to the cliff's edge, pacing about for several minutes at some little distance from her.

She was thankful for what she conceived to be a very delicate courtesy, and employed the interval in strenuous, and on the whole successful efforts to regain her self-command. But speaking of her intended sacrifice had invested it with sad reality, and the exertion to be calm was hard.

When Ragagni came back to her, she was mournfully quiet, but no longer in tears. He resumed his place in silence by her side.

'Datemi la mano,' he said, suddenly stretching out his hand. She was surprised, but saw no reason why she should not obey. His fingers closed with singular determination over hers. 'This hand,' he asked, 'is no longer, then, to him—his?'

Surprised and more than half displeased at this unexpected renewal of the subject, May endeavoured to draw back her arm. His grasp, however, was far too resolute to be thrown off by her efforts, though in no way violent or hard.

'But say to me—tell me!'

'And pray why?' said May.

‘Signorina!’

Severity darkened about his eyes, and his voice, still as ever passionless and slow, fell just a little into a sterner key. He was not a man to suffer contradiction or resistance. May hardly knew it, but the scarce perceptible change affected her with a touch of fear, such as a child might feel, in finding that it had unintentionally displeased a superior, formidable, though loved.

‘Oh,’ she exclaimed, thus driven to reply, ‘I have not told him yet, but I must tell him!’

‘Tell him what?’ Ragagni asked in haste.

‘I mean, break the engagement,’ said May, tears in her voice. There was a long interval before Ragagni spoke.

‘Signorina,’ he said at last, the clasp of his fingers making itself more and more felt, so that May lifted her head in fresh surprise. ‘Now is this hand, where it should be. Intend you?’

‘No.’ Struggling with her bewilderment, some secret instinct, grew faintly indignant and alarmed. ‘Signor Ragagni, you hurt my wrist.’

Ragagni raised her hand a little and then let it fall, still tightly imprisoned in his own. The gesture was of no significance in itself,

only serving to give emphasis to what came next.

‘I pretend to this hand, which that other, known that which I know, would not take. Si signorina, it is straightly held. Do not seek to remove it.’

But May did try to withdraw it, and to such good purpose that she succeeded, rising hurriedly in speechless consternation to her feet. His hand, however, had only quitted hers to fasten on her dress.

‘No, no,’ he said, with the same resolute composure, ‘do not you move. Sit you down again, signorina.’

As he looked up at her, her expression underwent a change, as from a shock of remembrance contending with lingering confidence, and presently resulting in soft feminine wiles. She sat down again, extending her hands to him as before with a peculiar gesture of frank pleading and affectionate regret.

‘Dear friend,’ she said, voice and manner exhibiting an entire alteration, becoming at once half reasoning, half imploring. ‘Listen to me. I cannot love the same person in two ways. In one way you have already all my heart. You are to me a protector—a saviour, tenderly revered, most gratefully esteemed,

you cannot want more from a foolish little girl like me.'

'I will have this,' he answered, once more raising her hand within his own.

Thereupon she essayed once more in vain to draw it back.

'No,' she said, 'nobody is to have it, henceforward. Signor Ragagni, do not hold me any more. Be wise and noble as you always are. You know I am in grief. And you know,' her accent breaking from its first forced composure into piteous reproach, 'it is no use to ask me, what you have asked! In that way my heart is not yours,—never can be! I pray for you, bless you,—if need were, I would work—starve for you, but I can't love you, and you know why I can't!'

'Thus,' said Ragagni, still with unchangeable calm, 'I, who leave you not, though I know of your misfortune,—although that took from me the sole friend, and imposed on me the most austere of duties,—though him who did that evil action you hold dear,—I am nothing to you! Of me, then, you — nulla vi cale!'

This speech in its whole extent, perhaps, May hardly understood. Her reply was to the concluding words.

'You are everything to me, but,—but,—Oh!

you are not my lover! What has made you think of such a thing? It is not possible, indeed, indeed it is not! I cannot speak of it any more. Signor Ragagni, it is not like you to hold me,—let me go!’

For a few seconds his grasp tightened, on the contrary, with emphatic pressure. ‘It is not possible?’ repeated he. ‘Signorina, think, think!’

‘I do think,’ answered May resolutely, ‘and I know what I say.’

But she did not altogether know to whom she spoke. A little longer he held her, then without any gesture of anger let her go. Catching up her hat from the grass, she made instant use of her liberty to rise. He rose also, and without speaking strolled away slowly once more to the summit of the overhanging rocks. A single moment’s consideration, and then May hurried home alone.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was late in the evening when Ragagni re-entered Bellair. Dinner was over, and his prolonged absence had occasioned some little wonderment at the house. He affirmed in explanation that he had lost his way in the Rocks, and if it occurred to one or two of his hearers that the story carried with it an air of improbability, there was ever that about Ragagni that hindered questioning, which might possibly be considered impertinent or ill-timed. His assertion was accepted as if it had been implicitly believed, and he went off to the dining-room to take his meal by himself.

Half an hour afterwards, when Alan was sitting with his wife and sister, the door was opened slightly, and Ragagni looked into the room.

‘I should like to speak with you, Valery.’
He spoke with that slow, calm, friendly accent

in which he always addressed Alan in public in common with the rest, and which rarely varied in any save the last particular when they were alone.

Mr. Valery's reluctance to grant a request so simple from so intimate an acquaintance and companion would have appeared singular to one unaccustomed to his ways. Catherine and May, however, ascribed it to what one called selfish indolence, the other the weary languor of feeble health. Rising at length, however, he followed Ragagni silently to the study. Arrived there he did not speak. He sat down with the unwilling submission of a man who has no choice but to submit, and waited for what Ragagni might be about to say.

'It is some time that I said to you to obtain more money.'

Still slow and calm in look and tone, there was more than ordinary sternness, authority more harshly manifested, as if less secure.

'I cannot obtain it.'

'No doubt Alan's desire was to answer with indifferent defiance. But his voice played him traitor. This announcement that he could no longer fulfil his part of their agreement, resigned his life to the mercy of his enemy, acknowledging his inability to purchase even

an hour's delay. The inward shrinking was not wholly to be banished from his utterance.

'Caterina has refused?'

Alan's 'Yes' was somewhat low and faint.

'Can you not then constrain that—diavola to give.'

Ragagni surely was not quite himself to-night. Very unusual was this impatience and irritation, and conveyed an impression of extraordinary anxiety and uneasiness at finding closed the golden fountain that had supplied his needs so long. Some such scene as this had been in Alan Valery's expectation for many days—ever since Catherine's refusal to give any more; a refusal maintained with such determination as was only too suggestive of the cause in her increasing suspicion of her husband's guilt, and of the use to which her gift would be in all probability applied.

To no one else could Alan turn in his necessity. He foresaw how this interview would result,—in fresh enforced recourse to Catherine, renewed resistance on her part, embittered hatred, and then conviction dawning upon Ragagni's mind that there was nothing more wherewith to indemnify him for delay, and hurrying on the end.

He kept silence, outwardly sullen, inwardly

full of pain and fear, whilst some unspoken struggle lent peculiar darkness to Ragagni's face.

'What portion has your sister?' he abruptly asked at last.

Alan looked up with a start. 'In what way is that any concern of yours?'

'Have you over it any authority?'

'No.'

It proved the reality of his love for May, that he was glad to know the answer he had given was the only one that it was possible to give. He knew his weakness, and intense horror of the death now drawing near, from which, had her little portion been at his command, he could have obtained a momentary reprieve. She would have given willingly everything she had, and he might but too probably have taken, yielding to the pressure of that terrible dread. He was content that a respite so obtained it should be out of his power to secure.

Nevertheless it was surprising to find such satisfaction shared by his enemy himself. Ragagni's features, on hearing that unfavourable reply, relaxed with an expression of relief.

'Tanto meglio!' he said, after a moment of

reflection, half aloud. Then raising his eyes from the ground whereon they had been meditatively fixed, he encountered Alan's, watchful, hating, and perplexed. The grave and thoughtful look hardened to the habitual aspect of stern scorn.

'You intend not?' he quietly observed. It was that quiet contemptuous tone that most of all stirred Alan's blood, and made the yoke of hopeless bondage heavy on his neck.

'I conceive,' said Alan, 'that your avarice is growing less clamorous than your revenge. If you could have got more money you would have taken it; with you it would be sin to lose an opportunity of gain. But the more cruel instinct rejoices in the prospect of speedy gratification.'

'You think I am interested as are you. I love the taste of blood—I want gold for its own respect? Thus has it been with you, who took noble life that you might win gold! For me ——' He broke off, appearing to fall suddenly into his customary abstraction.

Alan Valery turned to look at him, a kind of wonder mingling with the indifference of his despair. To defend himself against the charge of mercenary motives thus brought

was vain. What did it matter what Ragagni thought? But he felt a rising curiosity to penetrate more deeply into the reasons for that strangely chosen vengeance which he was to undergo.

‘Go on,’ he said, ‘let us know to what charitable purpose you apply the money wrung out of my blood ; what lofty end you intend, in becoming amateur hangman, to serve ? It is scarcely probable, indeed, that I shall appreciate your virtues as they deserve, but I am curious to hear what you can think they are.’

Ragagni raised his eyes without any apparent irritation. It was as if he knew too well the impotence of Alan Valery’s resentment, the vanity of rebellion against his power, to be susceptible of anger at this mere indication of their existence.

‘At the less, you will concede me two,’ he answered, still regarding Alan with a fixed deliberate gaze. ‘First, to advance the cause, cost that which it will. Therefore, with reason I must have made la signorina to advance it also, always that I hold her dear, and do not please myself at doing anything to her harm. The other——’ his voice losing

nothing in calmness, but gaining in significance, fell by a whole tone, 'avenge the assassination of Geronimo Varese.'

At that last sentence Alan's fierce raillery died out. He had rightly said that Ragagni's virtues would scarcely challenge his admiration. A momentary thankfulness that May could not be made serviceable to this all-devouring idol of a cause, comforted him a little, before the closing words recalled the terrors of his individual fate.

Answer was impossible. He sat still, contemplating with wondering abhorrence the character Ragagni had thus appropriated as his own.

It could not fail but that Alan's estimate of his enemy should be in part at least unjust. Doubtless but little pitying softness weakened the fibres of Ragagni's stern strong nerves. Bloodshed did not appal him; to see others suffering at his hands was, if he hated them, in no way disagreeable; if he loved them, even, not under certain circumstances insupportable. All revenge is selfish, but his, however, was not exacted for strictly personal wrongs. It was almost as pure from sordid considerations as Philip Lucas's pursuit of justice, and as plain a duty in his eyes. His devotion to the cause

he had embraced was not quite an unmixed devotion. From ambition certainly he was not altogether clear, but the ambition was not ignoble in itself. And it had become so identified with the cause that he could not have separated them, if ever it had occurred to him to try.

For this cause, his own much less still than Italy's, he was ready even to die. For its advantage he had delayed his vengeance. Those who would not sacrifice themselves for it, he sacrificed, though he had no dislike—even though he had a kindness for them, without relenting, if not indeed without remorse. Those two solely acknowledged duties, to serve the cause and to avenge Varese, together guided his treatment of Alan from the first.

'You must obtain the money,' he said, abruptly breaking the silence that had followed his last words.

'Yes,' said Alan. At the moment he was incapable of repeating that it was not possible that it should be obtained.

'Well, quick,' he added warningly. 'I need to have it very soon.'

Alan's silence seemed to imply submission.

‘Caterina,’ said Ragagni, ‘will be in the garden this hot night.’

Then Alan rebelled.

‘I’m not going out,’ he answered, with a sudden outburst of bitterness and wrath.

Ragagni looked for a moment, and then sat down silently, and went to work among his papers. Alan’s obedience was ever imperfect, but he knew the power of a little reflection upon nerves so sensitive and fears so keen. He knew what filled his victim’s thoughts, whilst he leaned back idly in his chair, watching the summer twilight as it grew dark under the trees. The short quick sighs, checked before they were full drawn, half passion and half anguish, needed no interpretation for him.

At last, without lifting his head, Ragagni said quietly, soothingly almost,—

‘Via; go then to find her.’

A few minutes afterwards Alan Valery rose up and went, wearing a look that might be thought to augur ill for the stability of Catherine’s resolution.

It was between eight and nine o’clock in the evening. Daylight was not gone, but here and there it was overpowered by the moonlight lying in broad strips upon the grass

between the openings of the trees. Catherine with a shawl about her was sitting under the laurel hedge. May, exceedingly restless and unhappy, was wandering listlessly about the lawn. Perceiving Alan, she came towards him, urged partly by that impulse of sorrowful affection which always drew her to his side, partly by trembling curiosity to discover whether Ragagni had mentioned his conversation with her in the Rocks.

Finding that she followed him, Alan sharply turned.

‘Not now, May.’

But after a few seconds his heart smote him, and with a tenderness for her amidst wrath and bitterness against all else, which she afterwards found it no small consolation to recal, he came back to where she stood, surprised and ill at ease.

‘Not just now, dear,’ he said, compelling his voice to gentleness and calm, ‘I want to speak to Catherine. Go in, out of the dew.’

Before she could speak he went on again towards the laurel hedge. The seat under it had become vacant during that brief pause, Catherine was retreating into the shrubbery walk behind, to avoid her husband, as of late

she had always tried to avoid him. She had been seen, however, and he overtook her presently among the evergreen shrubs, made once before familiar with his passion.

There was no softness, no cajolery, no pleading in the manner in which he proffered this his last request for Catherine's aid. As he came up with her, he said abruptly, in a tone that almost challenged a rebellious answer,—

‘Have you written to your bankers for that money I told you I should want?’

She started. For a moment she felt fear. But she had no lack of daring. Ragagni, when he believed Alan could under any circumstance make her give way, had underrated at once her courage and her hate. Her eyes flashed indignation and defiance.

‘I told you I should not write.’

As she spoke she turned to regain the garden where May was, as sure a restraint upon her brother's passion as anything could be, short of actual force. Perceiving her intention, he held her back.

‘No, no, Catherine, come down here.’

‘I will not go anywhere with you!’ began Catherine, fear gaining the mastery. But then

she looked up into his eyes, and that fear itself urged her to submit so far. He was very desperate. She saw that. After all a few yards down the path would not take them out of hearing.

Her heart beat thickly and unevenly as they paced on in silence side by side.

‘I don’t care, Catherine, I must have the money!’ Alan burst out passionately at last, as if resuming the discussion which had ended in her refusal a week ago.

‘You shall not have it!’ she answered instantly in a high voice.

There was a garden bench just there beneath the trees, and she sat down. Her limbs trembled, and she felt sick. She was contending with her lover’s murderer, contending with him possibly for his life.

‘Look here, Catherine,—’

‘It’s no use,’ she said, interrupting the threatening sentence, ‘you shall not have another farthing! Now, I’m quite determined,—let go my hands, Alan,—I’ve had advice, and I shall act upon it.’ (This was not quite true, for the only person she had consulted was Philip Lucas, whose decision had been that he did not see what she could do but

give,—but how was Alan to know that?) ‘Let go, or I shall call for help.’

‘You will not say a word,’ he answered, vehemently, but low. ‘You will come in and write the letter at once, whilst I see that you do it.’

He had taken one of her hands and tried to raise her, with the other she clung on to the bench.

‘A moment more, Alan, and I scream. I will not give you the money, though you should murder *me*.’

All of a sudden, as she spoke, he let her go, and staggered back against the hedge. The accent on the last word but one might not have meant much. But it was on the last of all. It implied that she knew him to be a murderer even now. All the suspicions that had haunted him since she let fall those fatal words about the ring were instantly and fearfully confirmed.

It seemed to him a long minute that he stood incapable of speech. Catherine was conscious only of an inappreciable interval, before he cried out, in a changed voice, putting his hand suddenly to his heart, ‘O God!—Catherine, I’m ill.’

The ineffable relief at finding herself at liberty to escape was quite untroubled through sympathy with the cause.

'Why should I care that you are ill?' she said, all the hate and dread and loathing that she felt giving emphasis to her words. 'It is fit you should have something at any rate to undergo!' Then she hurried from him, lest his strength should return, and she should be detained afresh, leaving him to struggle through one of those fits of pain which irresistibly suggested, as often as they came, the possibility that his life might prove even shorter than Ragagni's vengeance was willing to allow.

When the world came back to him—the consciousness of his dreary world of suffering and expected death—some one was with him under the shady bushes.

'What, then,' earnestly inquired Ragagni's voice, 'is happened?' The question had been asked more than once before Alan heard, and even now for a little space he did not reply.

'It was of no use,' he said at last. 'And she suspects.'

'Si?' said Ragagni, startled but yet unalterably calm. 'We want to be vigilant, and

prepare ourselves to that which we have to do.'

Why could he not have died then in that pang, of what seemed mortal anguish, that was scarcely passed? From the pangs of one death he had revived once more to look forward to another that was worse.

CHAPTER IX.

‘Well!’ exclaimed Mrs. Mann, ‘if ever I heard!’

This ejaculation—an expression of her feelings obviously imperfect—had in the course of the last half hour escaped her several times. It implied that such sentiments as she was hearing now she had never known or heard of before, but agitation preferred an abbreviated form of speech.

It was in the hot afternoon. Mrs. Mann had been shooting; her archery belt still encircled the waist of her black gown, and her hands, which, by their rise and fall, gave emphasis to her words, were enveloped in mighty dogskin gloves.

Just opposite, upon the sofa, sat May, paler than usual; her lips shut with obstinate compression; her eyes, by their determined down look, irresistibly recalling Alan Valery’s

sullen brows, gazing fixedly at the carpet, whereon she employed herself in tracing patterns with the point of her parasol. She abstained from observation or reply.

Between the two, his back to the fire-place and his coat-tails drawn tremulously under his arms, Captain Mann appeared struggling with an indignation which rendered him unconscious that no fire was behind him, and possibly supplied its warmth.

'O dear! O dear!' said Mrs. Mann again, slowly pulling off one glove after the other. 'Drat the girl! she's nothing better than a fool!'

'Have you well considered?' asked the captain sharply. 'Have you considered, May, what it is that you are doing?'

'There was no consideration wanted,' answered May.

Her voice had a scornful, almost angry, ring.

For the last hour these two, who had no sympathy with her, had harangued her upon a subject which she could scarcely endure to hear spoken of at all. As nothing had transpired at Bellair concerning her conversation with Ragagni in the Rocks, great had been her amazement, and bitter—as she could possibly feel towards Alan's benefactor and protector—

her resentment upon finding that he had enlisted in his favour the influence of the Manns. The consequence was that just as fiercely as at first, the long standing quarrel with her about her engagement to Philip Lucas had been resumed.

Had that been all, May might have perceived the advisability of yielding to their renewed opposition, and upon that ground justifying her conduct to her lover, from whom she felt herself bound to part. But Captain and Mrs. Mann had not been content with demanding the renunciation of Philip Lucas. At least they had suggested her acceptance of Ragagni as a consequence of such renunciation, making it altogether impossible to her to entertain for a moment their request.

By what means Ragagni had turned the perverse old people into champions of his suit May found it difficult to conceive. The step was fatal to their eager aim of inducing her to give up Philip. When once she had peremptorily refused, May found it much easier to go on saying 'no' than to modify her refusal, shrinking as she did from the irrevocable completion of her sacrifice, and unwilling beyond everything that anyone should know she thought of it till it was done.

In the same way, Captain and Mrs. Mann, after bringing forward Ragagni's name, and advocating his cause, continued to identify it with their own, just because they had pleaded it once, and would not confess themselves defeated by any opposition of May's.

So the battle waged, neither party achieving any apparent impression upon the other, until Mrs. Mann, proffering at hazard a statement of her husband's sentiments, made use of an argument which she expected to find of overwhelming weight.

'Well, I'm sure!' she said, menacingly glancing at the same time towards the captain, 'I advise you to think twice before you behave so naughty any more, May! It is scarcely to be expected that we shall leave you our money when we're dead if you're that disobedient to us in life!'

Fate being hard upon poor May, this time the captain and his partner were of one accord.

'I'll cut you off with a shilling!' said the captain, raising his right arm and then letting it fall with indescribably solemn resolution.

'There, May, think! what else have you ever got to look to?' cried Mrs. Mann.

'Well, now, listen to me,' said May, looking

up and speaking rapidly. 'Which is it that you think so meanly of, yourselves or me, that you suppose I would do for the chance of having your money what I would not do for your own sakes? I don't want the money! I'd a great deal rather you should be pleased with me than that I should be ever so rich!'

The speech ought certainly to have had a conciliatory effect. That their approbation was of value to her, May therein explicitly declared. But she had slighted their wealth, which, first considered a part of themselves, had by degrees become adorable and precious far beyond its possessors, even in their own estimation.

'Oh, well ——!' cried Mrs. Mann, and then words failed her from excess of feeling.

The captain gazed fixedly at May, until, in the midst of her sorrow and vexation, she began to wonder whether something terrible would not happen to his eyes.

'You're as mad as your brother, you're as mad as your brother!' he said at last impressively beneath his breath, 'not a pin to choose between you! He gets rid of what little he's got, God knows how; and you don't care to have any more!'

Then he turned suddenly, moved by un-

speaking consternation and disgust, as swiftly as if he had been pulled by a string, facing round to the empty grate, and regarding it with a vacant stare.

‘You’re not good to me,’ said May, passionately, after beholding their indignation for a moment, and feeling that her burden was already heavy enough without the troublesome addition of their stick to the bundle, ‘why can’t you let me alone? I’d please you if I could. You know I always have tried to please you in everything but this; and in this I must have my own way.’

‘Why don’t we let you alone?’ repeated Mrs. Mann, recovering speech, ‘it’s a pity for us we didn’t always let you alone instead of raising such a heartless ungrateful thing on the best of everything we’d got. O Lord! but I’ve seen trouble enough in my days!’

Trouble! What trouble had she had? May bitterly asked herself in her dreary indignation, while the captain remained motionless like a very stout statue, and Mrs. Mann counted up her archery score with divided attention that drew from her many sighs and imprecations, not all without exception pious. What had provoked, May wondered, Ragagni’s sudden

love? Or was it not sudden, but of deliberate growth, hitherto repressed? His protection, perhaps, had been extended to Alan for her sake? Could there be danger to her brother in her obstinate refusal? It was wronging Ragnani's noble nature—a nature which she infinitely admired, although she did not love, for a moment to entertain the idea. But his claim upon her was very painful, very perplexing. Why had he spoken to the Manns? He might have known that it could be of no use.

‘You ain’t deserving that a good man should care for you,’ said Mrs. Mann presently, glancing out of the window as she spoke.

‘What in the world could make him come to you?’ asked May with unusual heat.

‘He expected that you’d be grateful and listen to them as has given you bread.’

Tears of pain and anger sprang into May’s eyes.

‘That’s not deserved you know, that taunt. It’s cruel, and, besides, it isn’t true.’ Her ear caught the sound of a footstep on the stairs, and she stopped short with a look of alarm. ‘That isn’t him?’ she asked hurriedly.

‘I expect it is,’ returned Mrs. Mann. ‘I saw him in the street just now. And now you’ll

be off as if you couldn't bear the sight of him!' she added with much wrath as May snatched up her hat and started from her seat.

'I won't see him here, and with you.'

But before she could reach the door Ragagni's entrance turned her back. She could not leave it without passing him very close, for he stood still at once where he had entered, questioning the appearance of the group with his keen and steady gaze. A man of his sagacity must have been shortly made aware that he had scarcely chosen the best of advocates in Mrs. Mann.

'Signor Ragagni,' she exclaimed without pause, 'she's just the wilfullest, hard-heartedest, silliest young woman that ever I saw, and I've seen a good many!'

May, who had been waiting in uncertainty, with her veil drawn over her face, took resolution upon this, and turned sharply towards the door.

'Let me pass if you please, Signor Ragagni,' she said, with her head up, and a tremor of anger in her voice.

He moved silently aside, making no effort to obstruct her passage, and she went out, so deafened with the clamour of inward emotions

as not to hear his step behind her on the stairs.

The fastening of the street door was stiff, and gave some trouble to her fingers, trembling with an excitement that was absolute pain. Whilst she pulled at it with a haste that frustrated every attempt, an arm was stretched over her shoulder, the latch was lifted, and a low, stern voice said calmly in her ear, 'Nothing concerns you then your brother's life?' The door closed behind her, and May stood outside upon the step, in the blinding summer sunlight, cold to the heart's core.

CHAPTER X.

MAY VALECY retained but a hazy consciousness of the sensations that had accompanied her twenty minutes' walk up the long, hot hill, on finding herself at length beneath the ash avenue of Bellair. The nearing home, the passing that little thicket where Philip Lucas had left her about three weeks ago, seemed first to set before her in vivid outline the repulsive form of her fresh trial, the direction of this further path of suffering she was called upon to tread.

To resign her lover was not enough. That sacrifice, which at times had seemed an impossible act of heroism, was light compared to what was demanded of her now.

She turned aside among the thick trees and sat down where she and Philip had had their last meeting—the last now, probably, but one—on that warm day in June. Her head was

dizzy and her heart faint, with an anguish made up of many kinds of pain. There was the sickening thrill of fear, recognising as possible that her brother should be betrayed. She was trembling yet with the first terror of Ragagni's significant question and tone of menace. With this was mixed the grief—no little one to May—of learning that her confidence and admiration had been miserably misplaced, the revulsion of feeling from an almost worshipping esteem to fearfulness and mistrust. This was a pain that asserted its separate existence among those sharper pangs that grew out of Philip's foreseen unhappiness and wrath, her own miserable future as Ragagni's wife.

Nevertheless no faltering was possible before the acceptance of that future, if imposed as the price of Alan's life. There was nothing which May would not for him have undergone. She felt the full bitterness, the inexpressible horror of the sacrifice; but not for a minute did it occur to her to think that he for whom she made it was not worth saving at so immense a cost. If she had loved him less she would have done it still as a duty, a necessity of course, but with a less passionate affection, she would scarcely have contemplated it ungrudgingly as now she did. She was ready for it; she would

do it. Only let it save him from death, and she would give up, would suffer all.

She had formed her resolution, that is, she had acknowledged to herself that if Ragagni proved inexorable, there was but one thing for her to do, as she sat under the trees, her face bent upon her hands. The shade was growing cooler, the sunbeams glowed less brightly upon the avenue road. Afternoon was passing into evening. May's consciousness was narrowed to a single thought, made up of impatience, expectation, and fear. All her outward life seemed gathered in her ears. She was listening for a slow, uneven footfall to come up the drive with that peculiar sickness of heart, that longing which is agony, that contradictory dread which is like the shrinking from death itself, which await the moment for action inevitable, decisive, whose possible effects cannot be estimated by the most anxious foresight.

At last she got up, and going nearer to the road, stood leaning against a great grey trunk, gazing downwards in the direction of the gates. Had anyone come by, May, with her white face, her eyes preternaturally wide and dark, her whole look and attitude of eager, yet terrified, expectation, would have presented

rather a startling appearance in the deep cool shade of the ash branches.

No one came; the seven o'clock bell was ringing at Bellair. With that mixed relief and heart sinking which accepts a reprieve from anguish, conscious that the struggle must be fought another time, when the resolution wasted now will possibly be difficult to recal, May concluded further waiting to be hopeless, and prepared to go in. She had not moved a yard, when through the evening stillness she heard the avenue gates swung to. Some one was coming, and probably Ragagni after all. She sat down upon the grass in a faint flutter of dread, and listened for the peculiar footfall. His approach would be certified by that, and if it was not Ragagni, she could easily get out of sight among the trees.

A few minutes ended her suspense. She rose to her feet again, and stood looking down the road. Presently after, in his customary attitude of meditation, head bent and hands clasped behind his back, Ragagni appeared in sight. When he was close upon her, May moved forth from the shadows, and he looked up. She advanced but a few steps—just enough to attract his attention, and then stopped.

'I was waiting for you,' she said.

He turned towards her promptly, and then, without spoken suggestion on either side, they went deeper in among the trees.

At last May came to a stand, leaning back against a great ash stem, and looked up in his face. 'The gaze was unexpected in the intensity of its mixed terror and defiance, consenting and reproach. Ragagni was fascinated by it for a moment. The calm grey eyes, deepening and darkening as they gazed, grew wonderfully like others whose passion and whose sorrow he was well used to see. All of a sudden they were quenched in tears, a short, fierce shower, the brimming over of a piteous inward pain, the sense of treachery and loss with which her former happy confidence in Ragagni's mercy and protection was remembered now.

He stood watching her with that still grave expression which May had never before associated with the suspicion of mortal hate.

'Have you any pity in you?' she said, with vehement reproach.

'Si, signorina, a little—for you.'

There was nothing cruel in his tone. Like a glimpse of heaven came the hope that

pleading yet might save her from this dreaded fate.

‘Have you?’ she said, looking at him. ‘It isn’t that you love me—it *can’t be* that you love me—you know you are being more cruel to me than anyone else in the world could be. You knew it was inhuman to make use of such a threat. You know that rather than marry you I would die.’

Her passionate horror and reluctance sprang out beyond the power of concealment in the concluding words.

Ragagni’s face darkened a little. It was not an angry contraction, however, that knitted closer for a moment his overhanging brows.

‘Hear me, signorina,’ he said, fixing upon her the slow and intent gaze that Alan Valery knew and hated, and that May had stood in awe of, hitherto without dislike, ‘not love and not hate guide me solely in that which I do.’

‘What then?’ said May, passionately. ‘You want to compel me to marry you, and if I will not be compelled, you threaten to avenge yourself upon Alan! But why should you want to marry me?’ she went on, starting impetuously afresh, and so preventing Ragagni’s slower speech, ‘when you know I don’t love

you, but somebody else? Till now I have considered you my best and truest friend, but you will become intolerable to me. How could I help hating you if I were made your wife against my will? Listen to me, Signor Ragagni, as God is in heaven, I shall hate you, if you oblige me to become your wife. How can you wish it after that?’

‘What do you wish?’ asked Ragagni, in reply, speaking rather, as it seemed, of necessity than in anger, but with terrible significance, ‘his life—or——’

May paused, suddenly stilled.

‘Signorina,’ said Ragagni again after awhile, ‘of no value is discussion. You say to me, have I any pity? A guide is pity that may not be confided in. Of nature pitiful, it may be I am not. If I have of any pity, it would be of you. Not the less I may not listen to you. To me it is not permitted to do other than that which at present I do. Choose, then,—poverina!’

There was a touch of compassion in his voice. If the claims of tenderness and pity ever made difficult to him the service of that gigantic idol he had moulded out of patriotism and ambition for himself, it was probably

at the moment when he offered that cruel choice to May.

‘Choose, choose which?’ she repeated, partly bewildered and confused between the sense of this exhortation and the tone.

‘Choose then the brother’s life,’ said Ragagni soothingly.

‘And if not ——?’ she asked the unspeakable question with her eyes. The answer was somewhat indirect, at least in the literal significance of the words.

‘He is young,’ said Ragagni. ‘He is not willing to die.’ It was Alan’s sentence, and so May understood it to be. The utterance was slow, regretful even. But to no mortal ear could that speech have conveyed the idea of any but an irrevocable decree.

A shudder passed over May, a low wail or cry escaped her lips, and then she felt herself sink down upon the grass. She was not faint, she did not for a minute lose consciousness of where she was and with whom. She knew that Ragagni was kneeling by her, and lifting her head from off the dewy turf; she could look with her blank terror-stricken eyes into his dark face as he bent over her. But she could not stir. She could not move aside to avoid his touch.

He did not speak to her, he only raised her, pushed the hair back gently from her forehead, and fanned her a little with her hat. Some inward struggle troubled the stern, strong features with a rare look of indecision, sure to be remarkable upon Ragagni's face. It did not escape May, whose hope before the impending misery died hard. Strength came to her, and she caught hold of his hands.

'Oh!' she cried, with intense beseeching, 'don't do it, don't do it!'

He would have drawn away from her, but she held him with the clutch of despair.

'I do it not for my own respect,' he said at last, forced resolution closing like a sombre mask over his face.

'Why, then?' implored May, piteously. 'Why, then?'

He unloosed her clasping fingers and stood up. Struggling to her feet also, May supported herself by the stem of the tree near which she had fallen.

'Why is it?' she cried, with an agony of striving to understand, 'you don't do it for yourself? Why, then?'

All of a sudden, before he answered, light burst upon the darkness. She was to be Captain Mann's heir!

‘Ah! I know! It is the Manns’ money you want! Why couldn’t I see that before?’ An illumination of hope appeared for an instant on her face, and then there came a burst of tears, as some idea afforded refuge from despair.

‘But why, then, signorina?’ asked Ragagni, wondering in his turn.

‘For this!’ cried May, looking passionately up, ‘for this—that I will never have it—that I’ll prevent their leaving it to me, and you will let me alone if I am poor!’

Ragagni’s features settled into sterner calm.

‘You will not do it, signorina. By my life, if you should do it your brother is lost.’

Immediately the brightness vanished in a hopeless cloud.

This prohibition so utterly annihilating her last desperate hope reminded her that every way she was completely in his power. The least disobedience might be punished by Alan’s death. Despair chilled her into submission.

‘I see,’ said May, ‘I see.’

She sat down upon the grass, and put her hands over her face. Ragagni marvelled at the instantaneous quiescence. But in those silent moments May accepted her fate.

When at length she lifted her head the struggle was over, leaving a mortal paleness, an altogether sick and faded look, but no violence or passion to show how bitter it had been.

‘Now,’ she said to Ragagni, in a dull quiet voice, ‘hear what you have done. You have got the promise of a wife, whom others promise to make rich. But you have broken a heart that trusted you, almost as it trusted God. You have earned fear and hatred where you had confidence and love. God have mercy upon poor Alan and me!’

There followed a long silent pause, as she gazed straight before her with dry eyes that were evidently for the moment blind.

‘You will leave me to tell him this? I shall tell it best,’ she said at last.

‘You will not say a word of it!’ answered Ragagni in haste.

‘What?’ said May bitterly, ‘are you in no hurry to make known your triumph, to let the world know that Philip Lucas has been passed over for you?’

‘You intend not,’ said Ragagni, unangered by her feeble scorn. ‘I will to say that your brother must believe it is your own election.’

‘Do you think I should let him know what

you have made me suffer for his sake?' said May.

How could she regard Ragagni but with unspeakable aversion, invincible mistrust? And yet it might be, that the pain of sacrifice had not been hers alone, and that the very strength of purpose, which was proof against her heartrending appeal, was born of self-conquest, none the easier to achieve because it was mistaken, or because it inflicted suffering on others.

When May entered the house the letters just brought by the evening post were lying on the table in the hall. One or two servants were passing to and from the dining-room, and more to hide her face than from any curiosity she was capable of feeling then, she stopped and looked to see if any amongst them were for her. One there was in a hand she knew well, and could not gaze at now without a spasm of pity and of grief. She took it to her own room to read. Therein she learned that Philip Lucas would return to Lynnwater in two days' time.

CHAPTER XI.

THE evening of the next day was closing in before May left her room. She had excused herself from coming down stairs earlier, upon the same plea of a bad headache which had justified her non-appearance at dinner the preceding night.

Never was any excuse more true. Her head was racked with confused forebodings and restless fears. All through the long night and longer day she had thought of nothing but Philip's inevitable pain and anger, the dangers of discovery that beset her path, with all the misery of the future, a gloomy background forcing itself upon her shrinking eyes.

The first task that awaited her was the communication to Alan of her changed purpose, the feigning of a love that she did not feel, the disguising of abhorrence and dread the most intense. This difficulty must be

met and overcome at once. It was the first step, from which there was no escape. She left her room, in fact, with the design immediately to get it over.

For the last few days, since his sudden illness in the shrubbery, Alan Valery seemed to have relapsed into the state of weakness, the shrinking from the fatigue of general company, which he had manifested about the time of the discovery of the ring. May, therefore, coming downstairs a little after dinner time, was aware that she should find him in the study by himself, and might make sure of an uninterrupted hour with him alone.

She passed softly through the hall, along the dim corridor, by the never-opened doors, till she reached the last, from under which a narrow stream of light ran out upon the stones. Alan, who was lying down, rose slowly and reluctantly as she entered.

‘Don’t get up, dear,’ said May.

She stepped quickly to the sofa, dropping on her knees beside it, thankful to find this attitude would keep her face in shade. His, upon which the light fell strong, seemed very sorrowful and dark.

‘They told me you were not well, little girl,’ he said, putting his arm round her as

she knelt. May laid her head upon his shoulder, with a feeling of peculiar nearness to him, and more complete possession, resulting from the consciousness of an inestimable sacrifice for his sake, 'Dear Alan!'

'Dear May!' he answered with a half smile.

Yet at the moment he was sadder even than she was. She had reason to believe that through her suffering he was safe, finding thus, at least, some consolation in her grief. But a separation she could not foresee, a fate which she could not surmise, was present to his thoughts.

May was in no haste to tell her tale. There was a clear hour before her, and for a little while she would rather think of him than recal the sorrows that had come upon her as the inevitable price of his security. May had a strong heart that could not easily be crushed. Before her lay a future which, through her sacrifice, this adored, though guilty brother would be allowed to see, and in which she tried, as far as possible, to shut out the remembrance of Ragagni's share. Catherine was not present in the vision either, and whatever the condition of her own, Alan's life was to be unalterably calm and safe.

It was strange she should be capable of

such delusion then, perhaps, but the feeling was that she must have some recompence for the trial through which she was called upon to pass. After this profound affliction, it scarcely seemed presumptuous to expect that God would grant to her a little sober happiness; such happiness as Alan's personal safety, and, perhaps,—in that grave, quiet future,—his penitence and inward peace, might yet make possible even for Ragagni's wife.

‘What are you thinking of, Alan?’

The question with which in former days she had often playfully interrupted his silent reveries, had an unintentional plaintiveness in its accent now.

‘I was looking forward a little, I think,’ he answered, a terror in his voice which May did not perceive.

‘Were you?’ she said. ‘So was I! I was thinking of next year—or, perhaps, a few years hence.’

‘That’s a long way off.’ His earthly expectation had a narrower bound. For him it would be folly to indulge in anticipations, either bright or gloomy, of another year.

‘Not so very long,’ said May. ‘How fond I was of looking forward when I was a little girl,’ she went on meditatively—‘I used to

fancy all sorts of things. But things never happen as one fancies that they must, do they?’

‘Not often,’ said Alan.

After that May fell into silence. The unforeseen and woful change in her present prospects had immediately suggested itself as confirmation of his words. She turned her face a little so that her eyes were hid, and Alan felt a sudden pressure of her small fingers about his hand. Such caresses were expressions of tenderness always irrepressible with May. He returned it cordially, without being diverted from his own thoughts, dark, indeed, but fearfully engrossing.

‘Alan,’ said May abruptly, after a long silence, ‘why do people say that ladies may always change their minds?’

It took time to recal him from his sombre visions, and make him aware that she had spoken.

‘Why?’ he said, when he had at length been roused to consciousness of the question. ‘Because it is a known fact that they cannot keep them unaltered for very long.’

‘You don’t think it is wrong, do you?’

‘If it is inevitable, it would be hard to call it wrong.’

He was fast falling back into his own meditations before May spoke again. Her words came steadily, but very slowly, the natural sweetness being somehow gone out of her voice.

‘I have changed my mind about Philip Lucas. We shall not be married after all.’

Alan started in surprise that left no momentary cloud of other thoughts, holding her a little away from him that he might see her face. But when she could not shelter it upon his shoulder, she snatched away her hands to hide it so.

‘And why not, May?’ asked Alan, as it were at the end of a long breath.

‘O, because’—said May. But the because was not so easy to explain. To put her resolution into words had been an exhausting effort—a dreadful grief. She felt she must struggle with herself a little before venturing to speak again.

Alan had never sympathised with May’s choice, and some words of Catherine’s had before now suggested to him that she was not satisfied with the engagement. He guessed the reason to be what really it had been before Ragagni’s menace influenced her decision—a desire to free Philip from a promise which only ignorance could suffer him to keep. With

this notion, a pang of poignant remorse left Alan unable to press for a reply. He loosened his hold, feeling himself, as it were, parted from her by the suffering he had brought into her innocent life. May, however, finding herself no longer withheld, returned to her old attitude and place. His affection was her only earthly stay.

‘For a long while,’ she began again, faltering a little, and torn in two by the reluctance to say anything of Philip that should convey the remotest idea of blame, contending with her sense of the imperative necessity to conceal the truth from Alan. ‘For nearly six or seven months I have been thinking of it. We haven’t been on quite the same terms. The last time I saw him we—quarrelled. He wanted explanations and I wouldn’t give any. When next he comes—that’ll be to-morrow—I shall tell him I wish the engagement to end. The fact is, Alan’—she paused to make sure that words would come at her command—‘I have become engaged—to—somebody else.’

He had listened in bitter self-abasement till the last. But to the mystery of this conclusion his remorse at first could give no clue.

‘Engaged to somebody else!’

May’s perfect silence confirmed her previous

assertion. Neither spoke for many minutes. He felt that she was trembling, and that her weight pressed heavily against his arm. At last, through blank amazement and confused wonder for whose sake May had been induced to do violence to her constant nature, and forsake the lover to whom she had been so long engaged, there darted a horrible suspicion of the truth.

‘Who is it, May?’ he asked, with an accent of absolute terror.

May raised her head for an instant, and laid it down again, seeming, after all, incapable of answer.

‘May! who is it?’ In his anxiety his voice grew almost stern.

Then May lifted up her face and answered with a composure in bewildering contrast to the agitation he thought he had perceived before—

‘It is Ragagni, Alan.’

‘Good God, May!’

She rose then to her feet, and stood before him. How she had strength for it she never knew. She thought some fortunate madness came to her—some ecstasy of despair enabling her to mock at her own misery.

‘Ask Catherine,’ she said. ‘You will not

find her surprised. She'll tell you she has foreseen it coming a long while. Only the other day she mentioned it to me. I contradicted her then ; but that was of course. Nothing had been settled when she spoke.'

'May, do you think I am deceived?' exclaimed Alan, half deceived, nevertheless. 'Come what will, you shall never marry him.'

'Why, Alan!' cried May hastily, trembling for the consequences if he should really guess the truth. 'What is it you mean? When we know what he is!'

'Ah, yes, May! What is it you do know?'

With every fresh symptom of suspicion, her eagerness to mislead him grew to agony, lending her, against her heart-sickness, her intense rebellion at the falsehoods that must be forced to her lips, resources which no weaker stimulus could have supplied.

'I should not need to tell you, Alan,' was her seemingly reproachful answer. 'We owe your life to him.'

Alan got up from the sofa and came close to where she stood.

'We owe him nothing if he exacts this as the price from you.'

Discovery seemed so imminent, that May

quivered with alarm, and for a minute had not words to contradict. He took both her hands and drew her towards him.

‘Listen to me, my dear noble May, you have suffered enough for me. I would rather die than that you should ever be Ragagni’s wife.’

‘Alan, Alan, what are you thinking of?’ she cried, recovering presence of mind in this extreme emergency. ‘Are you ungrateful to such a protector as he has been?’

‘Ungrateful!’ he repeated, with a passion she did not understand. ‘But now answer me, May! Are you tired of Philip Lucas?’

A scarce perceptible pause, an unspoken prayer for help, and then May answered, peremptorily, ‘As matters stand, I would not marry Philip Lucas for the world.’

Alan remained silent for a brief space. ‘Turn to the light, May,’ he said at last.

Her heart swelled. A minute she resisted, and then, with wiser determination, suffered him to draw her round, and submitted to his puzzled investigation. The struggle had brought a flush of fever to the cheeks, the beautiful eyes were downcast, the soft kind lips, red with unnatural carmine, were parted in panting expectation of his decision. Her head was slightly turned aside with that inimitable

bend of the neck, half timid, half consciously proud, that was May's especial grace. So she might have looked had her love for Ragagni been a passion, her only hesitation in avowing it, the knowledge that she thus exposed herself to the charge of fickle change. Alan gazed in extreme uncertainty. He remembered the esteem and confidence which she had always displayed towards Ragagni, and was half convinced.

‘Now, May, I know that you are truth itself. Do you love this man? Is it possible that you wish Ragagni to be your husband?’

The affirmation of faith in her veracity was very hard to listen to. Was she sinning in so forswearing her inmost heart? Sin or not, there was but one answer that she could make. It should be as true as she could frame it, and the falsehood she prayed God to forgive. The life of one most dear, and perhaps scarcely fit to die, depended on her words. She looked up, and he could not see that she shrank.

‘If you prevent it, Alan, you will break my heart.’

He let go her hands and stepped a little back, sighing under the torture of doubt, mingling now with the not less torturing per-

ception that his enemy might possibly have won her love.

‘Can it be that all women are alike?’ he said, half aloud.

That was the bitterest moment May had to pass through in that bitter hour. She knew he thought of Catherine, marvelling that May, too, should show fickleness like hers. This fearful sacrifice, made for his sake, was then to lower her also in his esteem.

‘O Alan!’ It was a cry of pain, and the next instant she was shedding a storm of passionate tears. That this should be her reward was more than she could bear. Her heart seemed breaking with the sense of desolation.

Poor May! her tears were washing out all the impression she had striven so earnestly to make. It was an outburst of agony, in which all the secret suffering of the last four-and-twenty hours found vent, and to one so reasonably suspicious as Alan, intelligible expression also. This was no common grief, such as a little extraordinary excitement, or an unusually harsh word from him might naturally cause. He drew her to him in silence, and let her weep on, blessing her with unspoken love and gratitude.

But this enormous sacrifice should never be made for him. Better, indeed, that he should die than that she should marry Ragagni. Not that it seemed to him a choice between life and death. He guessed at once what May had divined but slowly, that her prospect of inheriting from the Manns, rather than passion for herself, was Ragagni's motive, and saw no probability that his intended vengeance would be abandoned for her sake.

But it was possible to defeat him, and Alan sprang at the hope with all the eagerness of hate. He could give himself up to justice, acknowledging his agency in Varese's death. Whatever the effect upon May of such a step, it would be better than this she had resolved to take. The secret, kept, at least in part, for her, must now for her sake be revealed. But whilst he saw this to be inevitable, he saw also that she must be spared all knowledge of what he meant to do.

'Hush, May,' he said at last, adopting a tone of tender remonstrance, 'there will be nothing left of you by such a flood of tears.'

'O, don't blame me, Alan!'

His disapproval, for whom she was renouncing all her hope, left her so utterly forlorn that, coming thus after those many terrible

hours, she sank under it with exaggerated misery.

‘I did not mean to say anything of blame, only you took me by surprise. But the affair will not be hurried, I suppose?’

‘I don’t know,’ said May, with an inward shiver, but outwardly a great effort to recover her false calm.

He lifted her face with his hand to kiss her, and then, with his arm about her, relapsed into silence. May had wept out all her tears, and was still, partly from exhaustion, and partly with a feeling of dreary satisfaction that this part of her difficult task was done. She shrank from thinking of the next day’s interview with Philip Lucas, courting, if possible, an interval of dull quiescence now, after her bitter struggle and fierce pain. Alan had resumed the former looking forward, not only nerved to unusual courage by his stimulated love for May, but almost to elation by the new impetus of hate which found consolation for expected death in the prospect of defeating Ragagni’s aim. Neither spoke or moved till a slow, halting step raised faint echoes in the long corridor without.

‘Here he comes,’ said Alan; and May sprang up. She was all white and trembling, but he

would not notice her appearance. He held her back till Ragagni opened the door, then bidding her go, before speech from her new suitor was possible, she passed out.

All tenderness had vanished from Alan Valery's look as he and Ragagni faced each other alone. The weary, sullen glance was vivid with hate; all grace of feature, all youthfulness of aspect, seemed obliterated and absorbed in detestation, no longer impotent, but full of menace. There was at that moment no shrinking from the death that awaited him. The belief that now at last he had the opportunity of avenging himself for the vengeance of his enemy, excited him to absolute triumph. If in the way of dying, which this man forced upon him, he could baffle and thwart him as he died, not all the pangs of mortal agony, he thought then, would be so bitter as that consciousness would be sweet.

'My sister is a girl of unaccountable taste,' he said, standing before Ragagni. 'I scarcely sympathised with her affection for Phil Lucas, but her present choice is a thousand times more difficult to understand. Nor should I have expected you to seek a connection with any Valery. You are less under the influence of prejudice than I thought. You are well

used to English customs — let us shake hands upon this new bond of intimacy—this prospect of close relationship so delightful to us both.'

He held out the hand once so strong, but now bony and wasted, and shaking with the excitement and rage which would have made its pressure deadly once. All that was over now. The fingers were crushed together helplessly as straws as Ragagni took them slowly in a grasp of iron. A venomous distortion marred for a moment the dark composure of his face.

'To him who stands to die,' he answered, with significant forbearance, 'one is ready to concede speech.'

CHAPTER XII.

THE following morning Ragagni announced the new engagement between him and May Valery to Catherine and the Manns.

All had heard May firmly deny that she entertained for Ragagni any love. To the Manns, indeed, she had indignantly refused to consider it possible for a moment that she could ever become his wife. They had all, therefore, a right to be surprised. But Captain and Mrs. Mann had exhausted their capacities for wonder when May so utterly contemned their fortune as to think a husband of their choosing too heavy a condition for the chance of one day calling it her own. That to them had been the amazing point in her behaviour. Her present change of purpose, in preferring her place in their will to that she held in her lover's regard, they hailed as a recovery from

extraordinary aberration of intellect, and rejoiced together, growing affectionate in their intense satisfaction, that after all their training would not prove wholly thrown away.

It was a great deliverance, this, from all connection with that rude fellow, Philip Lucas. A little discontent might after a while arise that the deliverance had not been complete from suitors altogether. But it had not arisen yet; and her acceptance of Ragagni was at any rate a flattering testimony to the force and wisdom of their arguments in his favour.

But Catherine, whatever she had formerly suspected, was very greatly astonished. May had denied the probability of such a thing as her discarding Philip Lucas for Ragagni so unfalteringly, so angrily, that, mistrustful as she was, Mrs. Valery had been for the time convinced. She saw now May must have been telling stories about it; but she had told them wonderfully well, proving herself to be after all of the true Valery blood.

The new arrangement had been announced by Ragagni with all his usual grave composure, and at first Catherine had said nothing but, 'Well, I am surprised!'

In the course of that conversation with May

she had rightly observed, that Philip Lucas and Ragagni were equally her cousins. Nevertheless, she had a kinder feeling for Philip than for the other. At one time she had held her cousin Ragagni in high esteem, though always exhibiting towards him more reverence than affection. But the intimacy that had since apparently sprung up between him and Alan Valery had diminished her regard. She would have liked ill that her cousin should prefer her husband so infinitely to her, even though Alan had been all that he was not. Being what he was, his friends never could be hers.

So she exclaimed, 'Well, I am surprised!' and worked herself into great indignation against May. 'She ought to have known her own mind,' she said to herself, without considering that to her also others might attach similar blame.

'I marvel not that you are surprised,' Ragagni answered calmly, as with a thorough, though not uneasy, appreciation of Philip Lucas's superior advantages of person and position. 'Others will be stupified as well as you.'

'A little while ago I should have been anything but surprised,' said Catherine. 'I fairly

guessed it. But she contradicted me then with most unnecessary vehemence.'

'When was that?' he asked, with some little interest.

'O, not long ago. She denied it eloquently. Some people can say things they do not mean as fluently as they would repeat the Creed.'

Ragagni justified poor May from the implied accusation in his heart.

'I ought to congratulate you, I know,' said Catherine again. 'But really, I am thinking of Philip Lucas. This triumph of yours will not be bloodless, cousin Ragagni. Philip's affections are very constant, and he had given his whole heart to this wayward girl.'

'Say solely what you please to say,' replied Ragagni, with forbearing kindness. And Catherine manifested by silence that she would rather not say anything more.

She sought no explanation with May, but observed towards her distant manners and an angry reserve. Under the circumstances this was all the better. The poor child would have found either Catherine's eager curiosity, or irritating exultation in the confirmation of her suspicions, a torture not to be endured. Nor did she see much of her newly accepted lover. He was keeping closer watch than usual over

Alan Valery ; and May, avoiding the house, wandered about in the gardens, waiting for Philip Lucas, and restless as a ghost.

She had at first been undecided whether it might not be best to write, seeking by letter to be released from an engagement she felt disposed no longer to fulfil. Once or twice she had sat down with that intention, but had found it impossible. She knew not what to say. Besides, there was an inconsistent longing to see him once more, though that farewell vision would be full of pain. Thus the time when a letter could have availed to deter him from coming to Bellair had been suffered to pass by, and now an interview was inevitable.

She roamed about the lawns, now and then sitting down exhausted on one of the many seats provided in shady corners or under spreading trees, to be driven presently by the sharpness of her misery to renewed motion, that the physical exertion, which every moment grew more hard to make, might give her some other sensation than the anguish of expectation with which her heart throbbed slow and thick.

At last she was too altogether sick and despairing, fainting with apprehension, shrinking from the light that saw her sorrows, for

further restlessness, or to suffer any more the sight of brilliant flowers, the hot glory of the summer's day. The shrubbery walk afforded, even in the blazing afternoon, a place of coolness and deep shade. As to a place of refuge, she betook herself thither, sitting down on the ground beside the solitary bench, laying her face upon it, and covering her eyes.

Every nerve was overstrained; every limb was utterly weary. So many hours of distress, following upon long months of more or less uneasiness and fear, demanded stouter fibres, duller sensibilities, to suffer without giving way. She felt quite crushed and overwhelmed. This waiting for the moment when her own lips must break the promise that it would have been such happiness to keep; when she must read anger, reproach, and scorn in the eyes that had hitherto assured her of true protection and strong love, had done more to wear out her courage and her strength than striving with Ragagni, and endeavouring to deceive her brother. Probably the actual stress upon heart and brain, without which the coming separation could not safely be accomplished, would not be worse to bear.

No immediate call upon her energy, her resolution; no pressing necessity to be quick

and wary, stimulated her to resist the gathering despair. She did not shrink more from what she had to do than from the future after it should be done. She was resolute to make this sacrifice; but she did not see how she was to live when it should have been made. She thought it would be cruel of God if He did not let her die. Some such feelings, perhaps, come to most sufferers in the temporary frenzy of sorrow that seems too bitter to be borne, to add afterwards their own pang of penitence and shame. May wondered at her own wickedness, and was startled into piteous efforts to believe in the light she could not see.

‘May!’ said a voice suddenly at her side. With such a heart-sinking as the condemned criminal may feel who hears outside his door the steps of those that fetch him to his death, she struggled slowly to her feet. ‘My dear May! you are ill!’

He had come back more tender, more forbearing. He had questioned himself in absence whether he could bear to lose her, and the answer had been so unequivocally that he could not, that he was prepared rather to restrain his imperious nature, to lay aside the armour of indifference he had striven for so long, than demand too much obedience from

her love, lest he should peril the gratification of his own.

'The sun is so hot,' May answered, with a sick accent.

'What, here under the trees?'

He drew her on to the bench, and sat beside her. Caresses were generally quite contrary to his principles, but in that soft moment of return, in the grievous surprise that one glance at her face awakened, he departed from his undemonstrative ways, putting his arm about her as a support. At first she suffered it, letting her head rest upon his breast as it had rested upon Alan's. Then, with uneasy remembrance of her new promises—the impending separation—endeavoured feebly to draw back.

'O, let me go!' she said, looking up at him with piteous eyes.

He thought he must have hurt her without knowing it, and loosed his hold. She slid away from him to the farther end of the bench, propping herself against a tree that grew up at the back. There was that at once in her movements and expression that could not but excite astonishment and alarm. He got up and followed her, bending down to look in her face.

‘What is the matter, May?’

She seemed to pant with the vain struggle to speak.

‘You are quite ill!’ exclaimed Philip. ‘Speak, dear! you make me very anxious! Tell me what has happened? This is no common indisposition, I can see.’

She had conquered her voice somewhat by the time he paused.

‘The heat has made me a little faint.’ She sat upright, pressing her two small hands together with a secret but strong wringing of the fingers, her straight brows arched and contracted, her eyes looking strangely wide and dark out of her pale face. ‘Don’t be frightened. It will go off. So you are come! Which way?’

She could not speak steadily or calmly even yet. Passion of some kind trembled in that ‘You are come.’ Philip saw he had been expected with unusual expectation.

‘You have wanted me, then?’ he said, well pleased. He sat down beside her again, and imprisoned the two restless hands within his own. ‘Well, I have wanted you, May. A little while ago I might not have flattered you by such an admission. You are a little witch, and have stolen away the strong and sober heart I used to have.’

She turned her head quickly from him in intolerable pain. Philip missed the overflowing tenderness, which, whether it were wise or not to give, he had always found it pleasant to receive.

‘She is certainly ill,’ he said to himself.

‘I haven’t very long to stay with you, May,’ he began again presently. ‘I left a friend in London desperately sick and quite alone. I promised I would go back to him as soon as I could possibly get away.’

‘O yes,’ answered May; ‘of course.’ She was hardly conscious what she said.

‘Look at me, May!’ said Philip, with an authoritative pressure of the hands he held.

‘You hurt me.’

‘Hurt you, did I? But then—turn and let me see your face.’

The old habit of obedience obliged her reluctantly to turn. Her look was so sad and strange that Philip started with compassion and fear.

‘You must not try me any longer, May,’ he said with half-commanding, half-beseeching earnestness. ‘Either you are very ill, or you have had some shock. Something is wrong up at the house?’

‘No,’ said May, almost querulously in her pain.

‘Will you tell me that this extraordinary pallor, this immense and perfectly transforming change, is only the result of passing faintness, occasioned by exposure to the sun?’

‘My head aches. I wish you would not hold me, Philip.’

He did not let her go, however, but held her a little away from him that his eyes might more easily command her face.

‘Are you angry with me? My letter grieved or annoyed you, perhaps?’

‘O no!’ said May, remembering its forgiving tone with a fresh pang of grief.

‘Then now, what is it? I have a right to know what troubles you. Tell me what it is, dear May.’

If she could but have told him! Might she only have explained how great was the necessity compelling her to act as she was about to do, without fearing that she would thereby give up her brother’s life into the hands of one to whose conscience mercy would assume the aspect of a crime. It was that pitiless justice of Philip’s that caused half the misery. Worse than the parting, worse than the after immolation which should render her Ragagni’s wife, was the thought of rousing his

anger, his reproach—it might be, his disgust and scorn.

But there was no escape for her, no such mitigation for either of the sorrow that must come. She could no more save him from the pain of believing her false and shallow-hearted, than she could avoid for herself the pang of being thus misunderstood. She sat up with so decided a manifestation of shrinking from his embrace, that he was forced wonderingly to let her go.

‘I am a little excited, perhaps,’ she said, ‘a little annoyed.’

‘You are altogether incomprehensible!’ exclaimed Philip, misliking tone and gesture, and with a growing and discouraging impression that this meeting might perhaps prove no more satisfactory than their last had been.

‘I don’t know what good you have done by coming back,’ said May, presently, in a dull voice.

He was silent for a minute, grieved, angered, and surprised. It was disconcerting, certainly, when consciously lavishing upon her unusual tenderness, to be told he might as well have stayed in London as come here.

‘What does that mean, May?’

She plucked off the leaves from an overhanging branch above her head, and began shredding them into small pieces without speaking, with a trembling hand.

‘You would have been better pleased then if I had not come back?’

Her lips moved, but at first he could catch no sound.

‘Unless it is that you are too ill to be at all like yourself, this welcome is scarcely kind,’ said Philip, after a waiting pause, during which the spirit and direction of their last conversation became unpleasantly present to his mind.

‘I had thought of writing to you,’ said May, at length, forcing herself to speak.

‘What for?’ He was driven back upon something of his old roughness to hide the anxiety of his heart.

‘That you might not come.’

‘I was wrong then in supposing that you would be equally desirous with me to forget the terms upon which we parted?’ said Philip, his voice hardening with the sense of wrong; ‘yet, May, if I was willing to forget what passed, you might surely be so too.’

‘I know you have much to forgive,’ said May. The leaves were all reduced to shreds,

and she threw them away with a vehemence of gesture wherein the pent-up misery, the unendurable excitement seemed to find expression and vent.

Her admission was highly satisfactory to one only anxious to extend unconditional pardon to all her shortcomings.

‘If you say that, May, I have nothing to forgive whatever.’

‘I shall be happy if you think so.’

There was little of happiness in the tone, but an unnatural constraint. Philip felt he might possibly have been forgiving whilst still ignorant of the offence.

‘It is very difficult to understand you, May! Do you know that your manner at this moment is hardly all that it should be—hardly such as I had a right to expect?’

She drew herself together with a sort of shiver, perceiving the decisive moment to be near.

‘I have come to think that I may possibly be unable to fulfil all your expectations. It will be better——’

‘Stop, May!’ He stood upright, gazing at her with reproachful wonder in his eyes. But there was such a look of wretchedness and sickness in the small white face, thrown back

against the tree stem behind the bench, a kind of desperate patience weighing upon the down-cast lids, that anger melted instantaneously into pity and grief.

‘Do you mistrust me, May, because I am rough?’ he said, with mixed pleading and remonstrance.

‘It will be wiser for us to part,’ said May.

‘Why?’

May felt her fate was needlessly hard. She had expected him to be indignant and stern, and that she would shrink in terror from his anger and scorn. But the gentleness and beseeching of that single word were worse to hear than the fiercest torrent of reproach.

‘I owe something to my guardians,’ she said, when she could speak, going mechanically through the part she had marked out for herself, ‘and I find their disapprobation, instead of being lessened, is increased.’

This argument was not for a moment entertained.

‘What has that to do with it?’ cried Philip, ‘they always disapproved. We knew that from the first. You are not obliged to sacrifice yourself and me to stupid prejudice like theirs.’

She did not answer, though she felt with a

strange relief that the soft, entreating mood would give way presently to more characteristic anger and pride.

‘If this is your reason, you are acting most unfairly by us both. It was never proposed that the continuance of our engagement should depend upon the withdrawal of their opposition.’

Still she made no reply, and he stood and looked at her in a sort of passionate silence. She would not meet the look, but she felt it. Presently she sighed, as with weariness or pain. That she suffered was so plain, that he began to accuse an over-scrupulous conscience of urging her to suggest a separation as terrible to her as it would be for him.

‘May, this is an absurd notion of yours! Think a little, and you’ll see that it is. Only tell me the reason is not anything in me?’

May paused, summoning her strength, ‘We should not be happy together.’

For a moment he neither spoke nor moved.

‘To speak plainly, you wish to have done with me?’ he said at last.

‘I ask you to release me from my promise.’

Another silence, and then he exclaimed with a gust of sudden passion—

‘Then I take Heaven to witness that you

are doing what you will be sorry for. I venture to say that there's not a human being who should hear the rights of this story, but would think you had treated me very ill! We have been engaged here—going on for a couple of years, and now, all of a sudden, you break it off! I declare that it is conduct altogether unworthy of what I thought you were!’

May bowed her head, in speechless misery.

After a time his sorrow gained upon his wrath.

‘Why should we not be happy together?’ he urged. ‘What do you know of me now that you did not know months ago?’

‘I have been thinking of it for months,’ said May, hastening to bring the terrible discussion to an end. ‘I have asked you to release me from my promise, but, of course, my asking proves that it is one which I find it impossible to keep.’

Despair had for the moment given her calmness. So calm she was that Philip grew suddenly self-indignant at his own grief and excitement.

‘It is wholly unnecessary, then, that I should grant this release which you pay me the compliment of asking,’ he said, calling dignity to his aid, but unable altogether to hide his pain.

‘However, withdraw your promise by all means—it should never have been given at all! You need not be afraid lest I should ever call upon you to redeem it, now!’

Her eyes were covered with her hands, but she heard his step move away along the gravel walk. A great cry burst from her unbearable agony.

‘O Philip, forgive me!’

No heart that was human could have heard without compassion that appeal. Philip turned and came back.

‘May, you are wronging yourself as well as me,’ he said, with sorrowful passion as he stood before her. ‘Whatever be the reason of what you have now done—reluctance to displease your guardians, or some fancied preference for another, your true self does not acknowledge it. You do not in your heart believe I should not make you happy.’

‘I could not—could not marry you, Philip!’

For the first time there flashed upon him as she spoke the remembrance of the rivalry which Catherine had once imputed to Ragagni.

‘You have, perhaps, contracted new engagements, or only wait to do so till the old shall have been formally dissolved?’

‘Philip, don’t judge me hardly!’

It was all admitted in that cry. Slow as he generally was to receive a new idea, the very distastefulness of this seemed to burn it in deeper in his mind.

‘Have they persuaded you to give me up for Ragagni?’ he said, with a thrill of wrath and grief.

She bowed her head down upon her hands, a visible shiver passing over all her body.

‘May, this is suicide!’ cried Philip, perceiving her uncontrollable distress. ‘You have been misled. Have mercy on yourself and me. You know you love me. Why should you break your own heart and mine?’

‘No, Philip, not your heart!’ she said, with a sort of beseeching, ‘you will be happier without me. Don’t stay any longer—only say that you forgive. If I were to marry you, the time might come when you would think I had done you an irreparable wrong. Philip, my choice is made.’

Then she freed the hands which he had taken, and stood up. She wanted him to go. It was like prolonging the bitterness of death, to have him beside her, the stay from which she must separate herself, strong with the love which, through no fault of hers, was forfeited for ever.

'O don't stay any longer!' she cried piteously.

'May, how can I forgive you?' he said with great bitterness. 'You are doing that which it will one day wring your heart to know that you have done. I don't forgive you. I can't. The hurt is too fresh. You have murdered both our lives.'

He turned from her, and May, sinking down in her old attitude beside the bench, knew that the sacrifice was made.

CHAPTER XIII.

THERE followed upon those eventful days an interval of quiet at Bellair. On all sides there was a general pause. May had done all she could, and now waited in hopeless resignation till called upon to take the final step that should make her Ragagni's wife. He, secure of May's submission, but uncertain what might be the extent or direction of Alan Valery's suspicions, or what he might consequently intend, lingered before making any decisive move.

Alan's real purpose, formed upon his first knowledge of May's engagement, had undergone no change; but he had fallen certainly from the former energy of his resolution to a determination, settled, indeed, and strong, but sustained more by a perception that what he had then decided was unavoidable, than stimulated and encouraged by that exquisite anti-

cipation of revenge which in the earlier moments of its adoption had blinded him to its inseparable agony and shame. The eager passion had burned out, and exultation that he was able to baffle and defeat Ragagni faded before the consideration that it would only be the consequence of self-surrender to a violent death.

True it was that in any event he was not likely to live long. Death in one or other of three forms offered itself as the boundary of a brief future. Between two of these three forms he might choose, deciding at will whether it should be public execution or secret murder. The third he could neither consciously hasten nor delay, but it might possibly come soon enough to save him from the others. He desired most earnestly that it might. From what he had been told, he was led to expect that even if sharp, it would be quickly over, and it would at any rate arrive without the aid of violence—it would be a natural death.

This possibility encouraged him to spare what time he might to the chance of its being fulfilled. If in one of those now frequently recurring fits of pain, he could escape from this entanglement of life without choosing a

means of exit revolting to himself, and which could only save May from Ragagni at the cost of much sorrow and disgrace, the advantage would be great to her as well as to himself. The reasons now inducing her to sacrifice herself for him would then no longer exist. Her engagement to Philip Lucas might not indeed be renewed, but the second could be broken the moment death should have removed him from the reach of public justice or individual revenge. Whilst Ragagni remained inactive, he remained therefore inactive too, thankfully accepting the delay, but aware that its impassable limit was one of those three deaths.

One contingency there was, which he shrank from owning plainly to himself, but which he could not wholly exclude from consideration as a possible event. And that was that Catherine might take the choice out of his hands. That her suspicions amounted to conviction he could no longer doubt, and though he was her husband, he was far from sure that she would spare. She had done nothing hitherto, but that might not be for want of will. At the same time she might be unwilling to use extreme measures against him, and he clung to the hope that she was. Bitter, indeed, would death be if brought about by any agency of

hers. It was any way bitter, but as the proof of her abhorrence, the satisfaction of her inexorable revenge, the bitterness would be such as he could scarcely bear. Enough of sorrow, enough of horror had attended every circumstance of his life, without such addition to the terrors of its close.

His whole course had been an utter failure—a miserable mistake. He thought sometimes he had been hardly used. His guilt had been a sort of accident, yet surely no long premeditated deliberate murder had ever met with sterner punishment than he had suffered for Varese's death. Or if no excessive retribution had overtaken him—and there were other times, especially when reflecting upon the subservience to the fear of death by which Ragagni had frequently prevailed over his better resolution, when he was ready to acknowledge that none had—others there were who never suffered any comparable penalty for their crimes. Many murderers, he believed, escaped altogether unsuspected, whilst he, for an action resulting accidentally from the possession of great physical strength, rather than from any bloodthirsty intention, had been tracked out and delivered over to an awful fate.

But such wondering, however it would not altogether cease, engaged him now less than it had engaged him once. His doom had grown so near and so inevitable, it was better to accept, submit to, and prepare for it, than ask rebelliously why it had been sent. It had been coming long, but there was a sense in which Alan owned remorsefully it might, perhaps, come suddenly at last.

Catherine Valery had not seen Philip Lucas before he returned to town. No one at Bellair had seen him, excepting May. But his visit was known, and so also was its result. May had come in very pale and sick, with a look that attracted Catherine's attention, and almost melted her indignation, as she passed her on the stairs going to her own room, where for the whole evening she remained in solitude. She had re-appeared the next day, employing herself in her customary occupations; but she was still colourless, and extraordinarily quiet.

Ragagni certainly was no ardent lover. Perhaps it was not to be expected at his age. But Philip had not excelled in delicate attentions; so that it could hardly be that May either regretted the tenderness of the one, or resented the want of it in the other. Nevertheless, there was so evident an avoidance of

Ragagni, so total an absence of affection and fondness in her bearing towards him, that Catherine, whose own love had been ever of the passionate kind, looked on with wonder growing into amaze. As for Ragagni, he seemed to be kind. Voice and manner, when he spoke to her, were uniformly gentle, pitying almost. And yet—and herein was the greatest puzzle of all—from time to time Catherine suspected in his words, underlying their proper signification, one of mysterious and urgent warning, reluctantly and yet menacingly addressed to May.

Catherine knew one guilty secret to be already in the house. It was never out of her thoughts night or day; and every inexplicable combination, either of persons or affairs, she was almost certain to refer in some way or other to its existence, and the circumstances to which it gave rise. May's conduct, if not utterly inexplicable, was difficult at least to understand. Her jilting Philip was nothing. Catherine had good reasons for knowing that such things were done, though probably she did not seek their confirmation at home. But her manner to Ragagni was very strange. Catherine thought at first she might be regretting what she had done, but, naturally

suspicious as she was, and living indeed in an atmosphere of secrecy and suspicion, she began to guess at more than could even on that hypothesis be accounted for.

One day, when all three were in the garden, sitting under the laurels, May had noticeably withdrawn herself from the conversation, retreating gradually to a little distance from the other two to sit alone with her work. That she invariably did so, whenever opportunity offered, Catherine had already observed.

‘What is the matter with her?’ she asked, glancing first significantly towards May, and then keenly in Ragagni’s face.

‘I knew not she had anything.’ He spoke without any appearance of uneasiness or irritation, but before many minutes had passed his cousin detected a grave and anxious look turned frequently in the direction of the farther bench.

Presently May’s reel of cotton, slipping out of her lap, rolled away among the grass. Becoming aware that she had lost it, there was an evident lack of energy to make any search. She let her hands fall upon her work and sat idle, staring in front of her with puckered forehead and an abstracted gaze. Ragagni, interrupting his conversation with Catherine,

rose, sought and found the reel, and carried it to her ; in doing so, his face was turned away from Mrs. Valery, and possibly bending over May, he desired to shield her also from observation. But as she drew a little back and looked up at him she defeated his intention, and exposed herself to the gaze that was watching her with eager curiosity. Ragagni said something as he gave back the reel, just a few words, of which Mrs. Valery caught only the last, uttered in a tone serious and imperative,—‘take care of what you do!’

May, shrinking suddenly away as she heard, lifted eyes full of horror and dread, pathetic in their helpless fear, but expressing an intensity of reproachful aversion that might have made the beholder upon whom they were directed willingly recoil. They were downcast again in a moment, and then she bent her head with a gesture of acquiescence. The result of it all seemed to be that she returned presently with Ragagni to Catherine’s bench.

‘So by the general vote of the company I am entreated to be less chary of my sweet society,’ she said, with something of her old sauciness, as she sat down. ‘I did mean to finish this collar for Mrs. Mann, and as for working whilst I talk, it is a mere pretence.

But so flattering an invitation could not be refused.'

'Never mind old Mrs. Mann,' said Catherine. 'You looked quite unhappy, sitting by yourself.'

'O no, impossible!' said May. 'If I must own the truth, in this hot weather I get a little drowsy. Where's that stupid novel we were reading, Catherine? Give it me, and I'll go on.'

She took the book and read out for a little while, beginning with a cheerful voice and abundance of emphasis. But in a short time the tone became monotonously dreary, and Catherine complained she could not make out where one sentence ended and another began.

'My head aches,' said May, by way of excuse. Her sudden spirits seemed to have as suddenly collapsed. 'I think I'll go indoors.'

As she spoke she looked across at Ragagni, as if to ask permission, not as with any love of needlessly courting the exertion of his authority, but as if she could not help herself. As if obedience to him was hateful, and yet she knew of some reason quite distinct from his displeasure why she must obey. It looked as if she had some part to play in which failure was infinitely to be dreaded, and sought to

know from him whether even the simple action she proposed would be at all inconsistent with it.

'Go, then, and repose,' he said, it seemed to Catherine with willing haste. He got up as if to accompany her, but provoked thereby so unequivocal a manifestation of distaste to his society as to make him immediately desist. He sat down again, uneasiness and displeasure knitting his brows into more than ordinary gloom.

This by-play was not lost on Catherine. Some mystery was here, connected probably with that great mystery of Alan's life. He and Ragagni she believed to be devoted friends. It was more than possible that May had been made, in this new engagement from which her heart revolted, the victim of one or both, not daring to resist. Catherine had no power to conceive of May's affection for the brother, who to her appeared altogether murderous and vile.

Possessed with this new thought, she also came presently indoors, and sat down in the empty drawing room to consider the idea. The first inevitable conclusion was, that Ragagni had been Alan Valery's accomplice either in or after the crime. And then, as she reflected upon her cousin's character, she knew

something of the fear that harassed May, only her fear was personal. She had turned sick with apprehension many times since her discovery of Alan's guilt, though until then, and even afterwards at times, she had despised him as a mere boy, an indolent invalid. The notion of Ragagni's complicity greatly aggravated her dread. Though there was never anything about him either ruffianly or even rude, he was such as no one would desire for an enemy, at all events ; but to know that her life was passed in the intimate society of two bloodstained and treacherous men, was a greater strain than her courage would endure. She experienced a thrill of growing terror, and at the same time a kind of drawing towards poor May, already suffering from this terrible involuntary connection with violence and crime, involving both in danger and disgrace.

CHAPTER XIV.

By the evening Ragagni had either forgotten that repelling look which Catherine had seen upon May's face, or its power to keep him at a distance had expired. As, after dinner, they sat in the drawing-room, with wide open windows letting in the warm air, and the light of a red August moon, Ragagni, leaving his pacing up and down in the garden with his cigar, asked her to come out.

'The fresh of the night,' he said, 'will alleviate your pain of head.'

May, sitting on the floor, her brows supported against the open window, appeared, however, reluctant to obey.

'Why go, if you don't like?' Alan bent forward a little hastily to say. 'She is tired,' he added to Ragagni. 'Let her be.'

'She will come,' said Ragagni, calmly in reply. And, indeed, Alan's words seemed to

produce an effect directly contrary to that he had intended.

‘O, it looks delicious!’ she cried, starting to her feet with sudden appreciation of the beauty of the evening. ‘Let me go, dear Alan. It will do my head good, and you know I like the smell of cigars in the open air.’

Alan had seemed at first inclined to make a very determined, and Catherine thought unaccountable opposition. He withdrew it now, however, but not readily.

‘Why should she not go?’ asked Catherine, as the two figures moved off slowly in the moonlight.

‘Why? Of course there was no reason at all if she likes it; I thought she didn’t.’

‘Why should she not like it?’

‘She looked tired, and might be only doing it to please him.’

Catherine paused a moment, and then getting up drew the curtains farther back, letting what light there was stream in in a flood upon the immediate space about the window. To this, when she sat down again, she had turned her back, directly facing the settle on which Alan had thrown himself in an attitude of mingled idleness and languor.

‘How do you account for this extraordinary fancy of your sister’s?’

Alan started and looked anxiously towards the shady corner where Catherine sat.

‘For Ragagni?’ he said at last, running his hand slowly through his hair as he spoke. ‘It is rather strange; you ladies ought to understand one another best.’

‘I never could understand May,’ she answered, with an accent meant rather for the annoyance of the listener than as an expression of any contemptuous sentiments she really entertained. ‘This affair appears to me very extraordinary, and does not exactly redound to her credit. She had been engaged nearly two years.’

‘There would be nothing astonishing in the fact that she changed her mind, if it were not that May is May,’ said Alan with hidden bitterness. ‘I thought it was what all women did. As for the comparative attractions of your two cousins,—why there we cannot judge. May finds one preferable to the other,—that is matter of taste.’

‘You suppose, then, that she is quite satisfied with her second choice?’

Alan sauntered to the window without reply.

Alone with him Catherine's daring ~~was~~ at its highest pitch. In the evening light the aging effect of anxiety and ill-health, and more sinister traces of suspicion and remorse, were but indistinctly seen. He almost looked the boy she had believed him, as he leaned against the window, his slight figure thrown into one of those listless attitudes peculiarly his own. There was nothing in his air to betray the cruel and violent temperament which Catherine imputed to him, or even the guilt with which he consciously stood charged. Leaving her chair, Catherine came and stood beside him.

He turned at the movement, glancing down at her with an expression half yearning, half suspicious.

'Fine night, isn't it?'

'Where are they?' asked Catherine, looking forth.

He pointed out two figures, one dark, the other light, standing together in the deepening dusk upon the lawn.

'Alan,' said Catherine, in a friendly tone, that could not be adopted without pain to the finer and more generous instincts of her nature, 'are you quite sure that May is satisfied with what she has done?'

Sighing, Alan moved a little away.

He understood perfectly what was passing in Catherine's mind, and recoiled from her false confidence with inexpressible pain and grief.

'Do you think she is?' repeated Catherine, at this sign of shrinking, with an eagerness altogether fatal to the end in view.

'It is to be hoped so,' said Alan, retreating to the farther corner of the window, watching Catherine from thence through the shade of his long eyelashes. 'It is enough, surely, to have once claimed the privilege of her sex. No woman will now feel bound by her example to remain true to her first love.'

'But I have seen her look at times absolutely afraid of Ragagni. You have seen it too,' said Catherine, with an emphatic affirmation, that was almost insolent.

'Afraid!' repeated Alan, mentally comparing May's present suffering with that which his surrender to justice would inflict, and wondering which might really be the worst. He could not easily, skilled though he was in dissimulation and self-control, have uttered more than that one word.

'O yes,' said Catherine, 'you've noticed it—you must have noticed it,' she added, recollecting herself.

‘What, that she is afraid of him? But what an unlikely thing!’

‘I don’t know. I’m not at all sure of that.’

‘You don’t seem to have the highest opinion of your cousin,’ he observed, keenly studying her face.

She felt his eyes upon her, and endeavoured to stand upon her guard.

‘I may not esteem him quite as much as you do,’ she said in a tone of moderation.

Alan rather showed his teeth than smiled.

‘I think you hardly do him justice. Where is he? What has he done with the child?’

He looked out with what seemed an irritable anxiety, which Catherine thought surprising.

‘Do you suppose she will be happy with him?’ she urged, persisting in her questions.

‘She knows best,’ said Alan.

He had had enough, and was turning even then to go.

Catherine felt his answers had been unsatisfactory. As soon as he was gone she began to be afraid, and wondered in uneasy alarm whether she could have betrayed her suspicion of his guilt. Finally, as the shadows deepened in the long empty room, she grew nervous and went upstairs to her own, leaving the door

ajar to watch for May's coming in. A purpose was gradually forming itself in her mind to write to her cousin Philip, inform him of her suspicions, and intreat him to come down to Bellair, that decisive measures might be adopted without delay. At any rate that she and May might not be left wholly at the mercy of Varese's murderers.

Before she heard May's step approaching along the gallery it was getting late. She called to her to come in, but the summons was unheeded, and May passed at once to her own room. Catherine remained by herself in the moonlight, stirring up the long-cherished desire to avenge her lover, which scarce required further stimulating, and brooding over her fears.

The position was, indeed, such as to try stronger nerves, and set at work an imagination less powerful than hers. When at last a faint sound as of a human voice in distress or pain reached her across the gallery through the quiet of the empty bed-chambers, her nerves confessed their unusual irritation by the thrill that ran through every fibre in her body. The breeze rushing from the open window to the half-shut door was making a

cool and pleasant rustling in the room, that at first prevented her distinguishing from whence the lamentation came. The next time her ear caught it, it rose distinctly from the opposite apartment, which was May's.

In another minute Catherine was at the door. She and May, she thought, were probably companions in misfortune and in peril. May, too, was deeper in the fearful secret than herself. Whether she would be disposed to reveal what she knew or dare to act against her brother might be matter of doubt, but it was possible, to say the least. At all events, Catherine could endure solitude no more, with those sobs coming mysteriously through the silent dark. And besides there was the natural womanly impulse to console. She crossed the gallery, knocked hastily, and, without waiting for permission, went in. At first she could distinguish nobody, but something stirred beside the bed, which she perceived at length to be May, kneeling, an irregular heap of white, with her face hidden in the clothes.

'May,' she said, in a frightened whisper, closing the door softly as she spoke.

With a little cry May started to her feet.

'Catherine! how you startled me.'

Then she went on hurriedly, alleging that

the pain in her head had been so severe that, though it was very childish, she owned, the tears would come. As she gave this explanation, she held by the bedpost, and Catherine could almost hear her tremble. Mrs. Valery took hold of her hand, damp, unsteady, and deadly cold.

‘Only your head, child!’ she exclaimed, disappointed, almost angered by this manifest reserve.

‘Feel how it throbs!’ said May piteously.

‘But this is more like terror than a headache,’ said Catherine, upon whom her own terrors grew, finding herself likely to be excluded from the hoped-for sympathy and companionship. ‘You have been in the garden with Ragagni,’ she added with daring significance.

There was a scarce perceptible pause, and then May answered with more composure.

‘Wherefore, you may be sure, I have had nothing to frighten me. You frightened me a little coming in in the dark, but I’m recovering my courage now.’

She drew her hand out of Catherine’s, and sat down upon the bed. She might speak of courage, but in her heart was terror that was agony, full of self-reproach for the weakness that had drawn such inquisitive attention upon

her, and, as she thought of the possible consequences, utterly dismayed.

Mrs. Valery, on her part, finding May so desirous to mislead and reassure her, thus in a manner making herself one with Alan and Ragagni, experienced a chilling sense of loneliness and desolation. Some conspiracy was going on all around her, whose secrets the initiated found it their interest to conceal from her, and yet that May's knowledge of their sin weighed upon her like an intolerable burden Catherine felt convinced. This determined concealment added to her fears. There was no saying how far, or how completely, this unhappy child was in the power or under the influence of her brother and his accomplice. While that their authority at all events was great, her rejection of Philip Lucas to form an engagement evidently detestable to her, established beyond the possibility of doubt. There was no mistaking that May acted in obedience to the dictates of some overmastering dread.

'I'm very sorry I disturbed you,' said May presently, as Catherine stood gazing at her doubtful and afraid; 'you must think me very foolish to give way.'

'I think you are worse than foolish,' she answered, venturing again upon a tone of

peculiar meaning, 'to be obstinately silent when a word might bring relief.'

Once more, there was a pause before May replied.

'I thought I had spoken. I believe, when anything is the matter with me, I continually complain.'

Catherine suddenly changed her tactics.

'May, I never said anything to you about the breaking off of your engagement to Philip Lucas, but I *should* like to know your reasons. The proceeding seemed to me incomprehensible altogether.'

This time the silence was longer and more marked than ever.

'I can't talk about it now,' was the answer given finally, in a changed voice. 'The whole affair was a great annoyance to me. My head pains—Catherine, I do wish you'd go!'

The last words rose almost to a cry. Instead of obeying, however, Catherine caught hold of her dress.

'May! what is it? O, May, what is it you are foolish and wicked enough to hide? What dreadful scheme have you lent yourself to further? It will be your own ruin! Mark my words—they'll have no pity upon you.'

May slid from the bed on to her feet, clutch-

ing her skirt away from Mrs. Valery's passionate hold.

'Catherine,' she said, a quiver in her tone that might be either anger or desperation, 'you are absolutely insulting. As for understanding what you mean, that's quite out of the question. But this is not the first time that you have been unpardonably rude to me. Considering that I'm a guest in your house, and your own cousin's future wife, I must say that your behaviour is more than strange.'

Catherine's vehemence began to sink into despair. She stood doubtfully regarding May.

'I don't believe,' she said, coming back to the point from which in her own mind she had started, and urged into an avowal of her convictions by May's obstinate reserve, 'I don't believe you will ever become Ragagni's wife of your own choice.'

'In answer to that, Catherine,' returned May, and this time, as it seemed, without hesitation, 'let me tell you that I would rather die than marry any man living against my will.' As she spoke she retreated to a chair by the dressing table, and sat down. There was not light enough for Catherine to discover anything by her face. May was evidently resolute that nothing should be discovered. A

few moments Catherine lingered, loth to go back to her solitary fears, then turned to the door, carrying away with her a heart almost as desolate as that she left.

‘I am alone in the hands of murderers!’ she exclaimed as she reached her own room and locked herself in. ‘They have made May their tool—she is too miserably afraid of them even to attempt her own deliverance and mine!’

She sank down in the window seat, preferring to turn her eyes upon the clear white moonlight out of doors than upon the dim recesses, the shady draperies within. Just in front the lawn rose sloping upwards to the terrace, made memorable by one blissful moment of her life. She could see the thick trellis where the late roses clustered still, beyond which stood the familiar garden seats, commanding that wide view of hills and sea Geronimo had beheld with her a few hours before his death. A burst of tears sprang from her mingled anguish of regret and fear. If that fatal night had never been, happiness would be her portion now. But her lover was long dead, and she was in the power of his murderer.

‘I will not bear it any longer!’ she cried,

at last, starting up—‘ Philip must come to me. It isn’t safe—God knows what it may be in their purposes to do!’

She struck a light with trembling fingers and got out her desk. No letter would be despatched till the next day, but till some summons to Philip had been written, she could not rest. Besides, if anything should happen in the night—and such was the overwrought condition of her imagination, the exaggeration of her terror, it seemed to her quite possible that Varese might have a fellow-martyr in herself before the morning, it would remain to indicate the authors of her fate.

‘ I have endured in silence as long as I could,’ she began abruptly in her agitation, ‘ but now I must speak. Believe it or not, as you will, but however that may be, come to Bellair at once. I have discovered Geronimo’s murderer—murderers, I should say—for I am pretty sure that there are two. Do you remember I told you I had seen the ring you dug out of the marsh somewhere or other before? You laughed at me, and said it was my fancy, nor could I then remember when or where I had seen it. Some time since, the occasion, and all connected with it, was most vividly recalled. It was upon

A. V.'s hand I saw it on the very night Geronimo was killed. I will tell you all about it when we meet. Think what I have suffered all these weeks, convinced of this, but yet unable to say or do anything to alter my position or avenge the dead, because I feared no one would place confidence in the recollection, and dreaded to defeat my own object by taking any measure that should afterwards prove to have been premature.

‘But now, though I have no fresh actual proof, matters appear more and more suspicious, and so, I think, you will admit. There is a secret understanding between A. V. and R.; of this I am convinced. M. is in the conspiracy—that is to say, she is in their power, compelled to act in their interests. She is evidently living in some great terror, and trembles when R. addresses her. But she seems to be bound hand and foot, and to have joined with them either through necessity or choice.

‘Let me beseech you not to delay in coming to me a moment after you have read this. I live a life of unspeakable anxiety and fear. This is no mere fancy—come and judge for yourself. I dare not be left alone with them.

Something must be done at once. If you only co-operate with me, justice will yet have its due. I shall post this (if I live) with my own hands the first thing to-morrow morning.

‘C. V.’

CHAPTER XV.

THE end was drawing near. But it was not to be such as Catherine and Philip Lucas figured to themselves, or one of which they were in any way to be the ministers. Neither was choice of Alan Valery's to hasten its arrival.

In the same day that Philip received his cousin's letter, only earlier, Ragagni also was made acquainted with important news. He had said truly enough to Alan that he possessed two virtues, devotion to the duty, as he deemed it, of avenging the murder of his friend, and unfaltering adherence to the cause, immediately represented for him by that secret political society to which he belonged. He had uttered no falsehood when assuring May that purely selfish motives did not regulate his acts. Furtherance of the undertakings of that society, and implicit obedience to its mandates, formed for him his religion,

the only obligations recognised by his conscience. Life itself, whether his own or others, was to be freely sacrificed if the advancement of the cause required. And if life ceased then to be sacred, all mere feelings that could hinder entire devotion to its aims, though they should be the pleadings of charity and the claims of love, **must be resolutely crushed.**

It was not probable that he looked on with indifference at the bitter suffering he had inflicted upon May. He entertained no personal passion for her that could have rendered the engagement gratifying to him in spite of her unwillingness and grief. In Ragagni's heart patriotism, ambition, the murdered memory of Varese, had left no room for love. Nevertheless he had for May a liking that he felt for no one else. She had pleased him from the very first, and all such tenderness as had survived Geronimo's decease, and still resisted the ever-extending usurpations of the cause, had circumstances permitted, had there been no stern obligation of vengeance to obey, no secret society to serve, he could have cordially bestowed upon her. But inexorable and cruel claims interposing, he heeded neither her suffering and tears, nor the relentings of his own heart.

It was possibly a great sacrifice which he accomplished thus, but he made it, and enjoyed thereafter, to all appearances, a greater calm than May's. In these times nothing good or noble can be effected without money—revolutions least of all. One day, that could not be far distant, May's coffers would be large and full. The crime he had to punish put into his hand a power whereby he might compel her to give him authority over her and everything that was hers. The duty to make use of it was plain—a painful duty it might truly be, but one such as he was resolute enough to fulfil.

But now, when the first step had been successfully, however reluctantly, taken, Ragagni found that, after all, the plan was never to be carried out.

A few hours before Philip Lucas received with horror and amazement his cousin Catherine's letter, there came a summons to Ragagni from that one indisputable authority, the Central Council of the Society. It was a call to prompter action, a demand for rougher, if not more difficult, sacrifice than what engaged him now. The mandate was not very explicit. The service, of which it told him no more than was absolutely necessary for him to know, was

probably less honourable than hard. Failure rarely escapes blame, and in his last undertaking Ragagni signally had failed. A murmur, openly discredited, indeed, but affording possibly the explanation of those two long years of forced inaction, had arisen then, suggesting that of the treachery that had ruined his enterprise, his own proceedings might not be wholly clear.

This fresh call to exertion, however arduous, however obscure, however doubtful even to himself its scope or its intention, lifted a great weight of bitterness and sorrow from Ragagni's heart. The calumny that had threatened to be fatal to his usefulness, his ambition, perhaps, even, his life, had not survived those two years of patient waiting and ingenious financial success.

But the summons worked great changes in the intentions he had lately nursed. First of all, there was no possibility of marrying May. He was allowed but two or three days of inevitable delay, nor could he leave Bellair until one thing were done—a thing which time, not sufficing for those skilful secret measures he might otherwise have used, would render his union with May impossible for ever. That other duty, hard and solemn, perhaps, even to

himself, but not for that the less a duty, must first be finally fulfilled. When he should start upon his distant mission, Alan Valery must not be left at Lynnwater alive. The vengeance now awaiting his convenience would not under those circumstances, be likely to come ever again within his reach. 'May's hand, with the reversion of Captain Mann's possessions, must be resigned.

He recognised the necessity with a real good will. He liked May well enough to feel relieved by the discovery that he was not to serve the good cause at her expense, and not passionately enough to regret that he was prevented making her his wife against her inclination.

The other necessity, unavoidable in his estimation, he probably did not recognise with any savage pleasure. It was a necessity, a duty, whose accomplishment strong nerves, and a heart steeled to resist all inconvenient pity, made easier to him than it could have seemed to any other man. But he had no particular satisfaction in shedding blood, though Alan Valery's he could shed without sorrow or compunction. He would rather have betrayed him at the last moment, and left him to justice in its ordinary course.

This, unfortunately, could not be done. Such a proceeding would involve delay, and delay was impossible to Ragagni.

Two somewhat dissimilar considerations helped to reconcile him to the fulfilment of his original plan. One, that vengeance exacted before his eyes, and by his own hand, he could make absolutely sure, whereas the execution of the law was dilatory and uncertain now and then. The other, that Alan's secret punishment would be manifestly advantageous to poor May. He could not spare him for her sake. But he pitied her inevitable sorrow, and derived real satisfaction from the reflection that she would thus escape all those sad consequences of publicity and shame to which, by her brother's trial for murder, she would be necessarily exposed.

As he sat musing in the study, with his intended victim, he decided upon the course to be pursued. It was a strange feature in the whole affair, and perhaps somewhat incongruous, that his vengeance upon Alan could not be executed without the co-operation of Alan himself. A noise, a struggle, was of all things to be avoided. Besides, it would be unnecessary, as well as hazardous, to take him by surprise, and would give an undignified

and murderous character to what was felt to be a solemn and righteous revenge. He must be warned, desired to hold himself in readiness, and the same considerations that had at first procured his acquiescence in Ragagni's plan ought now to secure his absolute submission.

Alan Valery perceived his gaoler to be more than usually absorbed in meditation to the neglect of his ordinary occupations. But the same unbroken silence was observed between them as before, and it was not likely that any particular observations upon the conduct of either would be made by his involuntary companion.

At length, late in the afternoon, as Alan sat, not reading so much as dreaming drearily, his elbows on the table, and his head between his hands, over a book, Ragagni rose and came round behind his chair. Almost before he felt the warning touch upon his shoulder, Alan looked up with sullen angry questioning in his gaze. But the expression of the face above him was no sterner than that it usually wore, and Alan expected no extraordinary communication to ensue.

Leaning his arms on the back of the chair, Ragagni glanced over at the open volume. Then he looked steadily into Alan's eyes.

‘What have you to do with such as that?’ he said, pointing to the book with peculiar meaning, ‘consider rather, signore, of the other world.’

‘Yes,’ said Alan, with a catch in his breath.

He had not on the instant understood the full significance of the address, but the possible though half perceived interpretation made him pale. Perhaps it struck Ragagni, what a young face it was upturned to him clouding gradually with a growing dismay, and even he saw something terrible and sad in the dark ending that drew on for those few years, moved thereby not truly to relenting, but to such compassion as was compatible with the purpose so unalterably fixed.

‘It is inevitable that I leave Bellair,’ he said slowly, and with an almost justifying stress upon inevitable. The tone, calm and serious, expressed, if indeed no hesitation, yet no bloodthirsty content. Alan did not answer or remove his eyes. ‘Approaches then the hour of your pain.’

The gaze upon him underwent a change; the eyes dilated and grew fixed; the shoulder upon which his hand rested still shuddered perceptibly beneath his touch.

‘Bisogna, that you resign yourself to die.’

With a sort of thick short sigh or gasp, Alan averted his face, and sat for a few moments perfectly still. Ragagni, maintaining his former position, waited till he should choose to speak. At last a shiver passed over him, and putting his hands on the table he rose up.

‘When?’

So far he had manifested a stunned and sullen calm; but when Ragagni answered, ‘Through two days,’ he seemed to wake up to the violence of the shock. He sat down again, and covered his face. Ragagni went back to the writing table, which was his usual place in the room, but did not occupy himself with any books or papers that lay thereon. Even he would not have had his attention free during those first moments of Alan’s hopeless agony.

It was a very great and bitter agony. The disappointed expectation of baffling Ragagni in the very act of death had, indeed very little prominence in his mind then. Perhaps, uncertain of Ragagni’s intentions as to May, he did not at once distinctly recognise that it must be disappointed, the interval that yet remained affording ample opportunity for the accomplishment of his meditated surrender. But at all events he was brought face to face

with death, even though by putting himself in the hands of the police he should obtain protection from Ragagni, and some extension of that brief limit of two days.

‘Why are you leaving Bellair?’ he said at last, feeling that his mind was much confused.

‘What becomes of your marriage?’

‘It is impossible. I go to Italia.’

‘You give her up?’ cried Alan.

‘Si,’ said Ragagni.

Alan left his place, and coming across to the window threw himself down on the wide old-fashioned seat, turning his face to the air. At the sudden tidings he felt almost as much bewilderment as dread. Once or twice he repeated to himself, ‘In two days, in two days!’ at long intervals as he looked out.

‘Why?’ he said at last.

‘Why? I am sent—elsewhither. I have not the time to accomplish my designs. Work is given me to do away from here.’

‘Such work as this?’ asked Alan, bitterly.

He saw now that he must accept the secret solitary death. Those reasons which had seemed to demand or justify, he hardly knew whether it would have been a sacrifice or a relief, his public confession, would cease wholly to exist if Ragagni resigned pretension to

May's hand. And indeed whether he resigned it or not, however skilfully he might conceal his agency in Alan's mysterious end, the motive for May's self devotion would expire with his life.

'How will you do it?' he asked after a time, in a voice of shuddering acquiescence.

'It will be soon done,' replied Ragagni, almost like one who wishes to encourage and reassure; 'solely—una pugnata—'

Alan lifted his hand with a gesture of intelligence, and he left the sentence unfinished.

'It will be of great importance,' he resumed presently, however in a tone serious and composed, 'that you should be tranquil and in no manner discomposed. With reason for your own respect as well as mine. Stay then warned.'

'I know—I understand,' said Alan, low and hurriedly.

'In this apartment,' continued Ragagni, 'the peril of being heard truly is out of ordinary small. But one must go with care,—circumspect.'

He sighed a little, and rising, came also to the window. Perhaps now that it drew near he thought it would be ugly work.

'It will be brief,' he said, looking down at

Alan, a strange sort of compassion in his voice.

‘You must make it short,’ said Alan, with great earnestness.

‘It will be done,’ replied Ragagni, ‘in the beating of an eye.’

CHAPTER XVI.

ABOUT the middle of the following day Philip Lucas walked into Catherine's morning room.

As she rose up from her chair giving him her hand, each looked at the other for a few moments in significant silence. Her face was keen, passionate, though expressing also great relief at his arrival; his was altogether troubled, perplexed, the face of a man struggling not only with natural unwillingness to receive a new idea, but extreme repulsion from the idea itself.

'I hope to God, Catherine,' he said earnestly, at last, 'that this notion of yours will turn out to be only an unfortunate mistake!'

'It is as true as that I live!'

She sat down again, a certain nervousness making her limbs unsteady, but without taking her eyes from his face.

'Where is he?' enquired Philip, in a low

voice, and apparently checking other words upon his lips, to ask.

‘In the study ever since the morning. He gives out that he is ill.’

‘And May—you say May—’

‘May will be no good to us,’ said Catherine, decidedly.

‘Of course not—he’s her brother. You see how it is, don’t you, Catherine? That is if your suspicions are correct. She has been made the price of your cousin’s secrecy. My poor little girl!’

‘We must crush the whole conspiracy now,’ said Catherine, with impetuous eagerness. ‘I don’t believe there would be any difficulty. When once suspicion has fallen on the right person its truth will be speedily made manifest.’

Philip turned and looked at her in evident uneasiness and perplexity.

‘Something must be done, of course,’ he said slowly, after a pause, ‘that is, if it should seem likely that you are right. What’s this about the ring? I tell you fairly I should not have paid any attention to what you said for a moment, but that as he is your husband one would think you must have had some strong

reason or other before it would enter into your head to suspect him.'

'I know,' said Catherine, in accents scarcely flattering to her hearer, 'you never believe anything that you haven't seen, or that hasn't originated with yourself. But if you will not be convinced, I must proceed independently of your help.'

'Don't talk of proceeding till we are sure it is absolutely necessary to proceed,' interposed Philip, hastily. 'He is your husband, you know—wretched boy! I wish to Heaven he had never come across you, Catherine! It will be a horrid business altogether. Well, tell me what you fancy about the ring. You think it was once his?'

'I know it was. It all came back to my mind; the time when I saw it, and where I saw it one night, some two or three months ago or more, in the beginning of the summer.'

'But then, how was it that you forgot,' interrupted Philip, 'and having forgotten, why should you recollect it then, all of a sudden? A thing that had clean gone out of your mind for a couple of years.'

'Will you listen?' answered Catherine with

a sort of angry patience. 'It was in this way—he had been behaving brutally, forcing me to give him money;—and pray, Philip, what, if he is innocent, has he done with all the sums of money he had from me,' she enquired parenthetically, going on again with her history before he could frame any reply. 'In the evening he had made me thoroughly ill, and I had gone early to bed; May was with me. He pretended a desire to make it up, and wanted me to take his hand. He was wearing a large seal ring, and the light fell upon it in a way that attracted my attention. Philip, you may deride me, if you please, but, with the rapidity of a flash of lightning, I remembered his offering me his hand two years ago on another occasion, when I did not care to give him mine, and the ring you found was then on his finger, and I remember noticing it in passing as old-fashioned and strange. It was the very evening that the murder was committed, the last time I ever saw Alan Valery till I met him in town. He was taking leave. Philip, I could swear to it!'

'And what about Ragagni?' said Philip. The accuracy of Catherine's recollection he was not much inclined to trust, but more than

one consideration drove him to confess inwardly that the 'suspensions founded thereon might not improbably prove correct. The old hatred between the two rivals, Alan's fierce and treacherous temper, his curious changes of colour and expression during certain conversations in his presence, concerning the search for the unknown criminal, which might well have overtaxed even his powers of dissimulation and reserve—his whole character as it had been read by Philip long ago, rose up as witnesses in favour of his guilt.

Then besides there was the mysterious alteration observable in May ever since the previous autumn, when the ring was found, and her inexplicable anguish during their recent parting in the shrubbery walk. Of small influence among so many considerations, but not without its weight, the natural tendency to magnify the importance of his discovery, suggested that it must prove of consequence at last.

'What,' he asked, reserving as yet any expression of his opinion, 'about Ragagni?'

'That he and the other are inseparable, and May evidently in his power. She is concealing something at his bidding and her brother's I am sure,' said Catherine. 'It is plain that she abhors and dreads him, but she

has nevertheless thrown you over to engage herself to him instead. Never tell me there are no hidden springs at work.'

'For him personally you think she doesn't care, then?' Philip asked with natural anxiety, 'once you know you thought she did.'

'I did,' Catherine admitted. 'There must have been acting on her part. In this house, where Alan Valery is, nothing is to be trusted, nothing to be believed. But circumstances have now aggravated her horror of Ragagni, to a pitch that she cannot conceal, though he menaces her for showing it.'

'Menaces?' reiterated Philip, 'A villain!'

Catherine sighed impatiently. The mention of an injury done to May, a harshness of manner even, stirred up at once her cousin's grief and indignation. But nobody had any sympathy with her, whose whole life had been made miserable, whom Alan Valery had irreparably wronged. Never had she known any love, that is, she had never recognised any save only from him who had been murdered because he loved her. To that unfortunate love, far more inexhaustible in memory than the reality would probably have proved, and to the bitter sweet reflection that signal vengeance for his

death might now be in her power to inflict, her heart reverted for consolation and support.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Philip, presently interrupting her sombre musing with the involuntary expression of his deepening amazement and dismay. The idea of Alan Valery's guilt was growing upon him with a kind of dreadful fascination. He had never entertained, indeed, such an opinion of Alan as would have received from any evidence of less depravity a painful shock. But he had not suspected that the wretched lad was capable of a deed like this. He was May's brother ; through him May became intimately connected with the perpetrator of a capital crime! The thought was overwhelming—his heart sank at the bare idea.

Alan's guilt afforded, it was true, an explanation of her engagement to Ragagni, less personally painful than the supposition of her having grown indifferent to himself. But he did not see how that new engagement could be annulled. Its fulfilment was no doubt the sole condition upon which her brother was allowed to drag on his miserable life, only to be hindered by a betrayal of his guilt,—the worst of cruelties to May. At this reflection,

feelings and principles came into terrible collision in Philip's breast.

'What do you mean to do?' he abruptly asked of Catherine, desirous to delay for a moment the consideration of what he would or would not do himself.

'Take the necessary steps,' was Catherine's brief reply.

For a moment Philip was silent. Then with accents so much the more decided that he knew himself to be doing violence to the avowed convictions of his life, rejoined, 'You cannot act in this matter as if he were not your husband.'

'My husband!' cried Catherine, 'that is only an aggravation of his guilt. He has killed and he has taken possession. He robbed Geronimo at once of life, and wife, and fortune. It was all for the worst possible motive—the love of money. He is the most debased and sordid soul! What claim has he to mercy that would not be shown to other men?'

'You cannot bring your husband, the father of your child, to the gallows,' repeated Philip. 'You cannot mean it—do you, Catherine? And May, too! It would break her heart. Good God!—no. It must not be done.'

‘The murderer is to go on enjoying the fruits of his crime, and his victim is to be altogether out of sight, out of mind,’ exclaimed Catherine, vehemently. ‘No justice—to be left unavenged, as if it had been a dog that was killed! It would be making myself a party to the deed. No, Geronimo, God is my witness, my heart will never be as false to you as that!’

She sprang up from her chair, putting her hands together, and lifting her eyes to heaven with a gesture of passion that could in no one else have been sincere.

‘How old is he?’ Philip suddenly asked.

‘Twenty-one—nearly twenty-two.’

As soon as she had answered she became silent, and her determined look grew discomposed. He was very young to have to die a violent and shameful death.

‘Miserable wretch!’ she exclaimed, dropping her face upon her hands.

‘It couldn’t be proved against him,’ said Philip, after a pause of meditation, ‘I don’t believe it could. What motive can Ragagni have had—I mean till lately—to conceal his knowledge of the crime?’

‘The money!’ answered Catherine, as in surprise.

‘Ah yes! to be sure—the money.’

Catherine sat down again, her gaze fixed upon the carpet, her eyebrows, always wonderfully mobile, alone by their rapid movements affording any expression of her thoughts.

‘Philip,’ she said, looking up at last, ‘matters cannot possibly continue in their present state.’

‘No, no, something must be done, of course.’

‘It must be done,’ said Catherine, catching the concluding words, and reverting to her former decision.

‘No,’ answered Philip, ‘what you’re thinking of cannot be done. There’s not evidence enough. At least as yet.’

‘I feel certain what the issue of a trial would be.’

‘You must not be the means of bringing your own husband to the gallows.’

‘Then do you move in the matter,’ said Catherine.

‘What I?’ He paused at this direct demand that he should do what his previous theory would indeed have designated his duty. ‘How can you propose such a thing?’ he demanded angrily at last. ‘Have you forgotten May?’

‘Then,’ said Catherine, with lofty sternness, ‘I must do it. Perhaps it is most fitting that

I should after all. Geronimo was murdered for his love for me.'

Philip gazed at her with a feeling of wonder and repulsion.

'Catherine,' he said, 'you have very little softness for a woman. Do you remember that it is a matter of life and death?'

'You are wickedly unjust,' retorted Catherine, with her usual vehemence. 'You are hanging back only because of May. If only you happened to be indifferent to her, you would be the prime mover of all this, though she would suffer just the same. Suppose it had been some other man? What pity upon his family would you have had? That he is my husband, what is that but that he has added crime to crime? He has sold his soul that he might be rich!'

'You could bring forward no proofs that would be accepted as such,' said Philip, abandoning the discussion of principle for one upon the practicability of her design, the more willingly that no conscious inconsistency pursued him there. 'Judged by the evidence, there is no case at all against him. You would only expose yourself to the accusation of having brought against your own husband a charge of murder upon insufficient grounds. What I

should propose,' he continued, after a pause, during which Catherine did not speak, 'would be some sort of arrangement that would assure your being freed from him for ever, but would not affect his life, or in any way make the matter known. Let him go to the colonies. Though I hardly know what he would do there,' he added, half aloud, reflecting upon the habitual indolence that might find such banishment worse than death.

'I see,' said Catherine, at last, 'that you make principles for the occasion. That has never been my practice. It is possible, however, that the time for action may not be yet arrived.'

'No, certainly, if you act at all,' said Philip, much relieved by the admission.

'And you will see Ragagni marry your May?' asked Catherine.

'No!' he cried, with indignation.

'How will you prevent it?' she asked, irritatingly calm.

Philip was silent. He himself did not know how.

'Your cousin Ragagni must be a thorough scoundrel!' he said at last.

'Enriching himself with my money!' added Catherine.

‘He’ll meet his deserts some day,’ said Philip, seeking consolation in that anticipation.

‘Where is the poor dear child herself?’

Before Catherine could reply, the door opened, and Alan Valery came slowly into the room. He was very pale. There was that in his face, whether the result of illness, or of apprehension, that gave an irresistible and fearful pathos to his look. All brightness was gone out of his eyes; even the subtle, sinister, suspicious expression, that Philip had hitherto half-unconsciously perceived and detested, had been driven out, obliterated by some striking but inexplicable change. The hand of death was upon Alan Valery, subduing all the fierceness of his hate and passion, calling up with its deep sorrow whatever of tenderness was in him, reducing to insignificance all other fear before the certainty of its approach.

So, though the presence of Philip Lucas was a great surprise, and his evident embarrassment and Catherine’s, at once suggested that they were taking counsel against him, he recovered quickly from the first shock, and came forward with his accustomed manner.

‘How are you, Phil?’ he said quietly.
‘You’ve run down for a day or two?’

'Yes, for a day or two,' repeated Philip.

It gave him an extraordinary and most disagreeable sensation, to feel within his own that hand, of whose guilt he was even more inwardly assured than he had allowed Catherine altogether to suppose. Such a nature as Alan Valery's, and the crime he had committed, Philip, being Philip, could not but abhor. He looked down with implacable loathing into Alan's eyes, languid with illness, dreary with the mournfulness of dying. Alan felt the look, and shrank from him weary of the universal hate.

'It is a cold day for August, is it not?' he said. 'At least, I have found it very cold.'

Then he turned to Catherine, and inquired of her where May was. Receiving her brief answer, he took a book or newspaper from the table, and left the room.

'Is he gone to her?' asked Philip, with angry and impatient accent; 'I must try and see her, Catherine.'

'How could you be so unguarded as to look and speak to him as you did just now?' said Catherine, instead of answering, and with an expression of dismay. 'Now, you know, he'll feel sure that you suspect!'

'How was one to help it?' Then after a

moment he added, in a tone of faint compassion, 'But he looked miserably ill !'

His unspoken reflection was, that it might not be improbable, and was on the whole a thing most earnestly to be desired, that this wretched and guilty life, which had no right to be prolonged, but which it would be so exquisitely painful violently to cut short, should come speedily to a natural end.

CHAPTER XVII.

SINCE the afternoon of the preceding day some further conversation had taken place between Alan and Ragagni concerning the business of the next. The time had been fixed, and Alan Valery could now accurately count the hours that remained to him of life. At eleven o'clock of the next night he was to die.

He had been given to understand rather than distinctly told, what were Ragagni's own personal plans. His murderer's safety was of great consequence to him, as, upon his discovery and apprehension, the motive for his vengeance upon Alan would be, of course, revealed in explanation of the extraordinary submission with which it had been borne, but in anything beyond that one point of his own death, Alan took only a languid interest, and was content to trust the safety of his secret to

the precautions Ragagni would naturally take to secure his life and undelayed departure to the scene of his new service.

He was to appear to leave Bellair between six and seven in the evening, bidding formal farewell, and setting out for Richleigh as he and Varese had chosen to do once before upon a memorable occasion on foot.

How he would arrange for his departure to be only apparent, returning and concealing himself somewhere in the house till the late hour when he might safely execute his purpose, Alan did not know, but he felt sure that no arrangement he might make would fail. Perhaps his long subjection to Ragagni had given him a foolish and exaggerated idea of his ability to attain any end at which he had once aimed. Alan did not doubt that this strange and dangerous enterprise also would be successfully accomplished.

It occurred to him that very likely the uninhabited chambers opening upon the passage to the study might afford the necessary concealment, but he did not ask. Speech had become more and more difficult and distasteful, so that in the unavoidable conversations between him and Ragagni on the subject of the morrow, he had confined himself to brief

syllables of acquiescence in such parts of the plan as it had been necessary to explain. He knew now all that he would have to do, and the exact hour when it was appointed him to suffer.

There were a few things beyond that—things that must happen after he had undergone his bitter punishment, and when, personally, he would have quite done with the world, which had to be thought of and provided for before that hour should come. The first claim on his attention was the probable effect his death would have on May.

When he should be missed, and sought for, and at last found, as it would probably appear, self-murdered, some sort of shock would be experienced by every one of that large household amongst whom he had lived his desolate and useless life. And to his sister, whatever of personal relief might mingle with later and more composed reflections, it could not fail to be at first a shock of utter horror, of overwhelming sorrow and dismay. He would rather that she should be spared the anxiety of the search, the anguish of the discovery. It would be better that on that day she should be absent from Bellair.

He resolved to send her to the Manns—not,

indeed, the most sympathising company, the best asylum for her in such trouble as hers would be, but company better than Catherine's, and an asylum at least removed from the horror that would be occasioned at Bellair. He had meant that she should go in the course of this same day, before the last, but had suffered the afternoon to fall, unable yet to bring himself to part with her, or finally decide by what arguments he should prevail on her to go. The arrival of Philip Lucas at once made perilous any more delay, and offered a reason for his plan, which he would have found it difficult otherwise to supply in answer to May's questioning surprise.

On leaving Catherine and her cousin together, he was actuated by another and stronger motive than mere shrinking from Philip's evidently new and not to be concealed suspicion. Following Mrs. Valery's brief directions he went out into the garden to seek May.

In doing so he found, as usual, that Ragagni was not far off, and turning, told him, a certain quietness replacing the customary sullen defiance, what he was then about to do. It was the best way to secure his last interview with May, at all events from an obtrusive supervision. Shortly afterwards he met her, just coming in

with loitering steps, and swinging her little hat in her hand. They were not far from a narrow, and almost unused path, that ran round the walls of the uninhabited wing under the windows of his own room.

‘Come in this way,’ he said, not stopping, but holding out his hand as she came up.

She followed him obediently into the shady alley, slippery with green moss under foot, and cool with the overgrowth of untrained shrubs along the sides.

‘Where does it lead?’ she asked, at length.

‘To the door of the passage by my room. Have you never found that out? Presently these bushes to the right will grow into the copse that comes so close up to the windows.’

‘You should have the branches cut a little back,’ said May.

‘What does it signify?’ Alan asked. He was not thinking only of the simple suggestion she had made. His words were rather the expression of an all-pervading consciousness that nothing earthly would henceforth be of any consequence to him.

When they had come into the study, he took away May’s hat, and held her for a minute with both hands, looking in her face. His own he

was able to keep under command, and she perceived nothing of the sorrowful yearning prompting that long gaze.

‘Alan, dear, I feel complimented!’ she said at last, with a little smile, ‘you don’t know what admiration is speaking in your eyes.’

He let her go with a kiss, turning languidly to remove some books that had been taken from the shelves, as an escape from the necessity of immediate speech.

After watching him for an instant, May tenderly interposed.

‘Let me do it, Alan, I know you are ill to-day, and had better keep quite still. I can make myself tall enough by standing on a chair.’

He yielded to her request, and sitting down, followed her movements with a half unconscious minuteness of observation. Poor little May had lost her beauty a good deal of late, but the pallor and the thinness, born of self-devotion for his sake, could not make her less lovely in his eyes.

‘Never mind the rest, May,’ he said at last, as she laboriously lifted the heavy volumes.

‘Oh! I’m not tired. Work does me good.’

‘But it isn’t of the slightest consequence

that they should be put away just now. Leave them alone, dear. There's something I want to say to you.'

'Coming directly.'

Not, however, till she had restored them all to the shelves, did she get down from her chair and come to his beside the window.

'The table looks better now, Alan,' she cheerfully observed, cheerfulness appearing to her of great importance in his presence, 'you are the most untidy boy, you know. Oh! Alan, what a pity; the wave is almost gone out of your hair.'

She was leaning over him as he sat, her cheek all but touching the brown curls that had been so thick and strong. Mechanically he passed his hand through them, as if to feel.

'Is it?'

His voice was very weary and depressed.

'Are you unhappy about that?' she asked, playfully.

He sighed, and wondered by what chance it was that she seemed unusually capable of feigning good spirits to-day. Though he understood the love that prompted the pretence, even pretended gaiety jarred upon him in his present mood, deepening by contrast the inward darkness of near and final separation. Still he

knew that if he could rouse himself to any similar affectation, it would on that occasion have been especially well.

‘I don’t know that I’ve so much vanity,’ he answered in his ordinary tone, low and gentle, but not altogether sad.

‘Well, you might have had,’ said May, with a recollection of his handsome looks, before the arrival of those two fatal strangers at Bellair, at once sorrowful and proud.—It was a melancholy subject—that wasted strength and altered comeliness. She left the back of his chair, and came round to the low window seat, near which it was placed.

‘I brought you here, May,’ said Alan, after a pause, ‘because I thought you had better know before going into the house,’—his study was so far removed from the general apartments as to be often mentioned as if it were not under the same roof,—‘that Philip Lucas had just arrived when I came out.’

He did not look at her as he spoke. He shrank from witnessing the start and pain, fresh evidences of the severity of that trial to which she was subjecting herself for his sake. Truly, he knew now, that in part at least it would very soon be over. But all the same, it was hard to see her suffering, to fear she

must suspect he saw and could divine the reason why she suffered, and yet hold his peace. He did not raise his eyes, but nevertheless was conscious that she stared at him blankly for a moment, and then turned her face to the open window hastily as if for air.

‘What shall I do?’ she said, after a long time, not quite able to choose her words, and rather hoping than perceiving those she used need not express any inexplicable degree of embarrassment or pain.

Nothing could, under the circumstances, be worse than a meeting with Philip Lucas, and yet her heart was hungering for the sight of him. If she could have been calm, the danger had perhaps been less, but feeling as she did, to see him would be only to repeat the interview in the shrubbery in all its anguish to herself, all its cruel angering bewilderment to him, she would expose herself to a chance of exciting his suspicions, which it would be as bad as murdering her brother to risk.

‘Alan,’ she said, with involuntary piteousness, ‘I cannot see him!’

‘No, dear, I know.’

Could she have helped it—was it a weakness subjecting her to just reproach? Suddenly, almost in the same moment that she was re-

solving to be calm, she let her face fall upon her hands in a burst of bitter tears. It was so dreadful to know he was near to her, there in the house, and that yet she must not even see him! She felt as if it was too harsh a fate that exacted from her not the sacrifice alone, but for a second time the agony of making it, hardly less wringing than it had been at first.

Alan, as he watched her, unable to console or help, aware that he must seem to acquiesce in this sacrifice of herself for him, could have been impatient for that hour, when Ragagni's knife would avenge upon him his crime and its results, and set May free from at least one fearful consequence that seemed to her inevitable now.

Did the thought come to her as he sat quietly by, whilst she struggled with herself, that she would never have permitted him to suffer thus for her? It came, perhaps, but she put it from her with instantaneous contrition. Rising from her place, she drew near to him with a sort of penitent imploring. She hardly knew what she did, and had lost sight for the moment of the hitherto important aim to keep him ignorant of the sacrifice, or at any rate of its extent, in the supreme effort to persevere in her resolve.

‘O Alan, love me!’ she said, with a craving for some token of his brotherly affection to console her resignation for his sake of another and a nearer love.

‘God knows I do love you, May,’ he answered, as he took her in his arms.

It wrung his heart, this appearance of consenting that she should undergo all this for his sake, scarcely considering that his betrayal would separate her quite as effectually from Philip. Perhaps he wondered at her attachment to a man whom he appreciated so little, but he felt then as if he would have died twice, once to be able to stay those despairing tears. Even his death, however, would not remove the barrier that Varese’s murder had built up. It might expiate the injury, but never could undo.

‘Do you forgive me all, May?’ he asked at last, when the sobs had grown still upon his shoulder.

She started a little at this plain admission that he knew what she was doing—perhaps it gave a pang, less now for herself than him, that he should be willing to let her do it. So at least he thought. Then she lifted her face silently and kissed him. He loosened his

clasp about her, and she returned quietly to her old place by the window.

There was a long stillness, Alan sitting with his hand over his eyes. At last May, as if conscious that that kiss had been wanting in warmth, and in the tenderness of sincere forgiveness, came once more to his side. He did not look up or move, but she put her lips to his forehead with her old fondness, before she would go back. Then she sat holding by the window bars, leaning out as far as she could to catch the freshness of the waning afternoon. She had that sort of dreamy and exhausted feeling that often follows upon great emotion, and started when Alan spoke at last.

‘Suppose that for a day or two you go down to the Manns’?’

‘Is he going to stay?’ asked May, trembling.

‘I believe he is.’

The house in the High Street was odious to May now, and former gratitude had not survived, without a struggle, the arguments she had then heard in favour of Ragagni’s suit. Yet there was no other place to go to, no other door open to her, which would yet bar the pursuit of Philip Lucas, if love should so

far conquer pride as to leave any inclination to pursue.

‘I suppose I had better go to the Manns,’ she said reluctantly, after a while.

‘They’ll make no difficulty about it.’

‘O, no!’ said May, the reverse of consoled by the reflection.

Another silence, and then she added resignedly, ‘I may as well go down at once. I don’t suppose anybody will think it strange. I’m afraid to go into the house. If you’ll tell Owen that I am gone, she’ll know what things to send.’

He watched her making ready to depart. One of the worst bitternesses that make last moments, even when resigned and holy, in some senses bitter, was drawing near to him, who knew not whether the resignation of the previous hours might not be better termed despair, whose pardon seemed to himself uncertain, whose hope of future rest was faint. He was parting from the only creature that felt for him so much as compassion. When she should be gone he would have known the last of gentle glances, or of tender words, left alone among those who scorned and hated him, to die.

As soon as she was ready he stood up and said he would go with her as far as the park wall. But all the way, the ending of this brief walk, the struggle to command himself so that she should not suspect of how much more it was the end, so occupied him that he did not speak. May had enough of sorrow, too, to keep her silent, but she saw how he stepped slowly, and seemed weak, and remembering that he had been suffering more than usual in the last two days, stopped half-way to beg he would go back.

‘You look so tired!’ she urged.

‘I’ll go as far as the door,’ he answered with brief decision, and then they went on speechless as before.

They came to it at length, the little door through which May was to go out of his sight for ever.

‘Good-bye, dear,’ she said rather wearily, as they paused before it. Not in her innermost thought was she grudging to him her suffering now. But its recent aggravation had left her strength exhausted, and in her tone there was something of the languid indifference of fatigue.

Nor could his farewell be less short and

unconcerned. This parting was not, perhaps, his very bitterest, pre-eminence in pain being reserved for that which would be the mortal ending of his unsatisfied and misplaced love. But it was only not the bitterest of all, only not the worst that he had yet to suffer in the four-and-twenty hours that remained. Yet it must be made as calmly as any ordinary separation of a few days.

He put his hands on her shoulders as she stood ready to cross the threshold of the door, and bending down, kissed her without speaking. She smiled cordially, anxious perhaps to reassure him as to the extent of her suffering, nodded to him, and passed out in her ignorance, all untouched by the solemnity, the yearning, the feeling of the end and death with which he found the moment full.

Philip Lucas was spared the embarrassment of Alan's presence during the remainder of the day. But he foresaw the necessity of accustoming himself to it. Catherine demanded that he should not leave her alone in the same house as her husband and Ragagni with earnestness impossible to resist, even if his own determination to see May and moderate for her sake Mrs. Valery's uncom-

promising measures had not afforded an all-sufficient reason for his stay. May's prompt removal to the Mann's excited much indignation in his mind, and was held by both to be significant of more than immediately appeared.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It was an ill-assorted party that assembled the next morning in the breakfast-room of Bellair.

Mr. Lucas being an early riser, had spent some time in solitary musing before anyone else appeared. Ragagni was the first to follow, and feeling it at once perilous and disagreeable to remain in his company, though neither took any open notice of the other, Philip betook himself to the garden, notwithstanding a slight fine fall of rain. He remained there pacing up and down till Catherine summoned him with a certain reproachful impatience from the window.

Returning he found that Alan Valery had not even yet come down. They went to table without him. Nobody seemed to consider either his absence or his presence of importance at Bellair.

The meal could scarcely be a sociable or

pleasant one. Catherine, with Philip Lucas and Ragagni for her sole companions, was necessarily in a very uncomfortable position. She took pains, however, to address her conversation impartially to her two cousins, striving to conceal all the indignation and abhorrence she felt for one.

‘What a change in the weather!’ she observed to Philip. Then turning to Ragagni, made to him the equivalent remark, ‘How cold it is this morning.’ Mr. Lucas spoke to her only, as if there had been no other person in the room.

Breakfast was half over before Alan Valery came in; no one made any observation. He usually was late. Bidding a general good morning, he sat down, taking up the newspaper that lay beside his plate.

‘The weather seems a little broken,’ he said at last, as he unfolded the sheets. No one appeared capable of making any less commonplace remark, as yet.

‘Rather,’ answered Philip.

His tone betrayed unwillingness to speak at all. He had but glanced at Alan when he entered, and by a look half compassionate and half surprised, had immediately afterwards bade Catherine remark her husband’s appear-

ance. The weariness of a sleepless night was in his eyes, his features were more than ever worn and pale. He looked to Philip as if the hand of God would execute judgment upon him before human justice could have time to ascertain its right to punish.

But Alan had great command over himself that morning. Perhaps it was the indifference of despair, perhaps the strength of some late found but efficient consolation that enabled him to appear calm and at his ease, a doomed man among those who thought he had no right to live.

‘Very little news!’ he said presently, laying the newspaper aside. ‘Catherine, did you find the storm disturb you in the night?’

‘I heard it.’ The answer was ungraciously short.

Then he turned to Philip.

‘You, I suppose, felt the effects of your journey, and slept well?’

It took a great deal to cause Philip Lucas a restless night, but there had been that in the previous day quite capable of producing such effect.

‘I don’t know whether it was the storm,’ he replied, showing likewise but scant courtesy to

his questioner, 'but I was rather wakeful as it happened.'

He pushed away his plate and sauntered to the window. He detested Alan when he spoke to him. His selfish tyranny over May, his love of money, and disregard of blood, always returned to Philip's memory, changing his struggling pity into loathing at the sound of the low languid voice. He was sick at heart when he remembered May, joined at once by blood and by affection to this guilty soul. Long as he might for her, he shrank inexpressibly from connection with the murderer of Varese.

Soon after Mr. Lucas left the table, Ragagni turned to Mrs. Valery.

'Caterina, it needs that my sojourn, thus pleasurable, at Bellair shall finish, very quick.'

The announcement came upon her with confounding suddenness. She started, looking at him in mingled astonishment and expectation.

'You're going?' she cried hurriedly.

'I have to depart,' answered Ragagni in an accent of regret. 'I have received intelligence. I am sent elsewhere.'

'Sent!' she repeated, under her breath.

Then she turned suspiciously upon her husband. 'Alan, you know of this, I suppose?'

He laid down the newspaper he had once more taken up.

'Yes, he has already told me.' His voice was perfectly natural and steady, and he also had adopted into it a semblance of regret.

'You received intelligence,' said Catherine, once more speaking to Ragagni. 'When? this morning?'

'Last night; but I said nothing of it before I had considered the thing.'

For a few moments Catherine preserved an anxious silence. She looked round for Philip, but he had gone out again into the garden. She felt alarmed, perplexed. This sudden resolution of Ragagni's betrayed beyond a doubt some working of the conspiracy between Alan Valery and him; since, beyond that, there was no divining the cause, neither could there be any certainty as to the possible effect. Plainly, however, this measure as removing one of the guilty parties from the supervision of Philip Lucas and herself was dangerous, and called for immediate action on the opposing side.

'Well,' she said at length, feeling it necessary to say something, 'it is very unexpected,

this determination of yours; but at least you do not contemplate leaving us at once.'

'There is in it no remedy,' answered Ragagni; 'this night I depart.'

Hearing that, Catherine held her breath. Then she looked in bewilderment at Alan. He remained quite silent, leaning back in his chair.

'You knew this, too?' she cried.

'I knew this also,' he said quietly; 'Catherine, is Bellair a prison, that a man mayn't leave it when he likes?'

He had rightly calculated the effect of his words. She was forced into immediate acquiescence by the fear of drawing attention to her own suspicions.

'Oh!' she exclaimed, hastily repelling the idea. 'But I am so surprised—it seems so strange. Is May aware of your intention?'

'I must communicate it to her this afternoon,' replied Ragagni, more regretfully than ever. Confusion seemed only to increase with thinking. Catherine saw nothing that she could do.

'At what hour, then, will you have the carriage?' she resumed at length.

'Grazie, but as I have explained to your husband, I will walk.'

‘Walk!’ echoed Catherine to herself, that other occasion when in one night two set out on foot for Richleigh from Bellair, a destination which only this man before her reached, flashing instantly across her mind.

‘In the rain?’ she said, curiously, ‘and with your lame foot!’

Ragagni appeared for a moment to reflect.

‘Ah!’ he said, ‘that storpiatura! I forget myself of it, even yet; order me then the carriage at the seven, if you can do it with your convenience.’

‘Very well,’ said Catherine, helplessly. Then she left the room in search of Philip.

‘What are we to do?’ she asked, having related to him all that had occurred. He paused with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the ground.

‘We must let the villain go, I’m afraid,’ he said at length.

‘Never,—surely!’ cried Catherine, almost weeping with excitement. ‘He may come back here, and—God knows what they may not intend to do! Philip, I’ll find out where he goes, at any rate!’

‘Your carriage people will see him safely off.’

‘They’ll take him to Richleigh, but who’s to know what becomes of him after that?’

‘We can’t prevent his going,’ said Philip.

‘What a helpless creature it is!’ exclaimed Catherine, impatiently, as this distasteful opinion was pronounced. ‘You’re worse than useless, I declare. You’ve no resources, no expedients—you never know what should be done! Do you mean that this thief, this murderer, is to go off and enjoy himself upon my money?’

‘Well,’ said Philip, with something like contempt, ‘suggest what you think we’d better do.’

After a little hesitation Catherine answered resolutely, ‘Proceed as we had always intended to proceed upon discovering the perpetrators of the deed.’

‘Impossible,’ said Philip, with great severity. ‘Catherine, it’s awful, this implacable revenge.’

‘Whose fault was it that made me implacable and hard, instead of the loving and warm-hearted girl I was?’ demanded Catherine, with passion.

Philip did not reply, doubtful, perhaps, both as to the warm-heartedness and the youth. She felt inclined to go away and leave him, since this was his humour, for it was chilly on the lawn, unprotected from the drizzling rain by either hat or shawl.

'It might be as well to know where he goes,' said Philip, as with this resolve she turned. 'I'll consider if it can be managed in any way. You wouldn't like me to go, I suppose; and, besides, he'd see through it all.'

'Certainly I will not be left alone with that man,' said Catherine, with decision.

'Very well, then there's an end of that. You'd better go in out of the rain; you are not doing any good, you know, out here.'

Thus dismissed, she went in, sitting down in the empty breakfast-room to lament the hindering indifference of her ally, and ponder over this unexpected manœuvre on the part of the foe.

There had passed but few words between Alan Valery and Ragagni when they were left alone; only a question from Alan Valery as to the compatibility of driving to Richleigh with Ragagni's plans, and this answer—

'Intend you not?' he said.

'This, then, is what I will do. Half an hour before it is commanded, I will find that it is time to depart. I will set forth on foot. The carriage shall follow me, but shall not find.'

After that they retired to the study. Ragagni's watch, peculiarly cruel during these

last hours, nevertheless naturally appearing to him more indispensable then even than before.

During the morning Alan Valery employed himself in writing. He could not leave his conduct altogether unjustified to May; neither did he wish her to remain under the idea that he had died by his own hand. In this, therefore, his last communication with the world, not to be read till he should have been violently hurried from his place in it, he explained to her his intentions, and described the manner of his expected death.

The packet being closely sealed, he enclosed it to a correspondent at a distance, with the request that it should not be returned according to the address to May within for two or three days. By this arrangement it became impossible that the letter should be read until Ragagni should have left England, the inquest be over, and Alan Valery himself in his grave.

This writing occupied him during the earlier part of the day, so engrossing his thoughts as to make him almost forgetful of Ragagni's presence.

But in the afternoon, when all was finished, and nothing remained but to look forward to the end and wait, solitude being impossible,

the company of Catherine and Philip appeared preferable to the sole society of the man by whose hand and in satisfaction to whose revenge he was about to die. He went into the drawing-room, not a little disconcerting by his entrance the two counter-conspirators taking counsel together there.

A feeling of illness was growing upon him apart from the increasing oppression of his secret dread. He sat down by the window, with his face averted from the interior of the room.

The clouds had cleared away, and the evening promised to be fresh and bright. The close of the dark day would be pleasant and serene, unlike the life, full of hope at its beginning, whose ending almost before noon drew on in violence and blood.

In the room behind him Philip sat doing nothing, but thinking a great deal, and very uncomfortable thoughts. He was afraid of what Catherine, in her impetuous vengeance, might, notwithstanding his remonstrances, resolve to do. Her excitement, notwithstanding many efforts to suppress it, was visible and great. She had work in her hands, upon which she endeavoured to keep herself employed, but the attempt was conspicuously

vain. She and Philip spoke to each other for the sake of appearances from time to time.

To Alan Valery none uttered a word. It was strange self-flattery that imagined him to be unconscious of the suspicions they entertained. Now and then there came and went outside the door a heavy halting footstep, when Catherine would drop her work in her lap, and look across at Philip; and Alan, listening also, would, with a shiver, recognise Ragagni's tread.

At last, as six o'clock was striking, that step paused and entered. He was coming to go through the pre-arranged pretence of having mistaken the real starting time of the train. Alan turned to see how he would do it.

'Caterina, did you command for me at the seven the carriage?'

'You said at seven,' answered Catherine.

'I was in error,' said Ragagni, 'that will be by an hour too late.'

Then Alan, rousing himself to do his part, suggested that Ragagni should start immediately, the carriage being ordered to follow, and endeavour to overtake him on the way.

'Plainly,' said Ragagni, 'that is what I have to do.'

'You won't get very far with your lame

foot,' said Catherine suspiciously; 'you had better wait for the carriage.'

Again Alan interfered.

'Every minute is of consequence, and they take such a time to put to, that he is likely enough to reach Richleigh before Jones gets out of the stable yard.'

'Your husband talks reason,' said Ragagni with decision, and then the farewells followed hurriedly.

Catherine acted her part but ill; she saw fresh danger in this new manner of departure, and was at once bewildered, angered, and alarmed. Any leave-taking between Philip Lucas and Ragagni was out of the question, and the former had already quitted the room. Alan and Ragagni parted in too much haste for Catherine to notice the manner of their adieu. With reluctant eyes she saw the traveller issue from Bellair.

An hour and a half later, as they were going in to dinner, Philip Lucas called his cousin aside. The carriage had failed to find Ragagni on the road, nor had the coachman seen anything of him at the station, though the train by which he was to go was then but just arrived.

Catherine lifted her hands with an expression of dismay.

‘O, Philip, this is your fault ! This fatal waste of time ! Now you’ll see, they will both manage to escape.’

‘Catherine,’ answered Philip solemnly, ‘your husband has to me the look of a dying man. God is dealing with him. We must let him alone.’

‘Dying!’ said Catherine in incredulous accents. Nevertheless, watching his face as she sat opposite to him at dinner, it did occur to her, for the first time, that Alan’s illness was not nervousness or pretence, but a reality, fast growing incompatible with life.

The thought did something to abate the fierceness of her feelings towards him. The idea that she was hunting down one upon whom the pains and terrors of a mortal sickness had already taken hold, had that about it upon which she did not like to dwell. Yet after all it might not be illness that gave him that peculiar look. It might be the feeling that more or less possessed them all of a crisis rapidly approaching, which his guilty conscience could not doubt must have terrible results for him. There was a bewilderment in his manner now and then, an incoherence almost in his speech, such as in the morning

he had effectually concealed, and which looked liked growing terror.

He was able to eat nothing; faint with illness, he only kept himself alive by long draughts of water. Had anyone been present aware of his crime, believing it premeditated even, but personally unaffected by its results, something must have been done for him, some compassion for his physical suffering at least have been displayed. But Catherine was steeled by the remembrance of her wrongs; Philip at once by the prejudices of a whole life, resentful recollection of the cruel tyranny that must have been practised upon May, and an idea that being utterly unused to illness, his best course would ever be to let sick people alone.

May's patient and unalterable tenderness, Alan, thus left to himself, recalled as with a sort of wonder. It was difficult to realise in that hour of forlorn abandonment that any one had ever shown him pity, much less love. He felt assured that he was actually dying, and that in another sense than followed from the fact that he was presently to be put to death. Natural dissolution would be but very narrowly forestalled by that violent end.

But no one came to him, no one tried to

give him ease, no one seemed to think it of importance whether he lived or died ; yet there in the room with him was one upon whom he had wasted the most passionate love, whom he loved passionately still.

He uttered no complaint, possessing that kind of fortitude which can bear patiently and well suffering that comes in the ordinary course of things, however much he might shrink from the stab of Ragagni's knife ; but mere living and breathing had become a difficult matter, and engrossed a great deal of his attention.

Catherine and Philip at last spoke to each other of his looks, and it did not attract his notice. He heard neither Philip's anxious observation, 'He is very ill,' nor Catherine's dubious rejoinder, 'Or else very much afraid.' Only, when Mrs. Valery left the room he started, being thus reminded how much time was gone. Soon after she had departed Philip's voice disturbed him, asking gravely, 'What is the matter with you? Are you ill?'

The tone was not unkind, but pity failed to swallow up the recollection that the object pitied was guilty of at least one great crime. Alan roused himself with a sort of impatience of such commiseration.

‘This place is very hot,’ he said, without answering the question. ‘If you’ve drunk your wine we’ll go into the drawing-room.’

Philip assented, marvelling whether Alan was capable of doing as he proposed. And indeed, after making the suggestion, Alan yet delayed to move, leaning back in his chair and gazing fixedly at the mantelpiece clock.

Philip would not disturb him, but sat still and watched. ‘A few days,’ he thought, ‘will see the end of this,’ and then he wondered with a painful wonder in what degree Alan might be considered ready for the end.

At last, when the hands of the clock were at half-past nine, Alan turned.

‘Shall we go now?’

Having drunk some wine he rose more firmly than Philip thought to see. Going out, he walked slowly, but without apparent difficulty, and Philip, after watching him to the drawing-room door, returned himself to that which they had left. He was perplexed and embarrassed by his own position, and as there could be now no possible danger to Catherine from the unfortunate dying lad, he seized the opportunity to reflect and be alone.

Thus, in the drawing-room, there was no one

but Alan Valery and his wife. The evening, proving colder than usual, a fire had been kindled in the grate, before which she knelt. There was no other light, and coming in quietly, she did not hear his step or know that anyone was in the room with her till he stood by her side.

‘Who is that?’ she asked starting and with a perceptible tremor in her voice.

‘It is I—Alan.’

Drawing away, she sat down in the low chair at the other side of the fire-place. He marked eager glances directed towards the door by which she hoped to see her cousin shortly enter.

‘Where is Philip?’ she asked, when a few minutes passed and he did not appear.

‘He went back to the dining room.’

‘What for?’

‘I don’t know.’

Speech was difficult. He wondered with a sort of dull pain how anyone could be so indifferent and weary mortal weakness by such unimportant questions; even Catherine with all her wrongs. And yet the sense of those wrongs was very heavy upon him just then, and mingling with repentance that vain, ill-

starred love, not dead yet when all that could die was dying, filled his heart with a sad yearning for her forgiveness and compassion.

Here was the bitterness he had not known when taking leave for the last time of May. Here, all the love and all the anguish now and for ever were pure waste. No tears would soften the reproachful eyes gazing at him suspiciously in the fire-light. No sorrow would wring the heart whose impulse was a little accelerated now through fear of him, when his miserable end should become known.

And yet the knowledge of this could not make him willing even so far as she was concerned to go. It only made the coming separation so much the more bitter with the feeling that it must be eternal. He thought that Catherine would be implacable even in heaven, and that the torments of the lost would scarce appease her inexorable revenge.

Through he knew not what prostration of mind and body, he lay down on the hearthrug at her feet. He lifted to her face despairing eyes. The fire-light fell full upon him, and Catherine, whom the gesture had at first surprised, as she beheld the alteration of his features experienced a little alarm. She had a horror of dying people and of death. What

if Philip had spoken truly, and he was, after all, at that moment mortally ill.

‘What is the matter with you?’ she asked, a nervous terror fastening upon her heart.

But he could not speak. He answered her with a dumb glance. She drew back and watched him for a minute’s space.

‘Are you ill or are you doing this to frighten me?’ she cried presently, with the irritability of fear.

Then, though scarcely such as he would have deliberately chosen, the bitterness of reproach extorted speech.

‘I feel dying!’ There was a marked alteration in the voice, an unmistakable forerunner of that great change now drawing on so fast. After a startled pause, Catherine stooped down and stirred the fire into a blaze.

‘Let us see how you look,’ she said, intently examining his face.

It was a face dark with death. What life there was had retreated to those beautiful passionate eyes that lifted towards her seemed at once to remonstrate and to pray; an awful agony was in their upward glance. She stared into them, and for a time was speechless.

‘Alan!’ fell slowly and faintly from her lips at last.

A few deep quick sighs came like great gasps from a bursting heart. His strength was gone; he hid his face suddenly and wept at her feet. The disappointed yearning of his whole short life, mixed with the anticipation of a near and horrible parting, had its expression in those tears. It was not this, however, that Catherine saw. She deemed this anguish wrung out by the terror of betrayal and a felon's death, the pleading look she read as an appeal against her merciless pursuit. She was appalled, and felt for a moment as though she were a murderess to pursue, he a victim only whom she was hunting down.

No remembrance of her lover came then to harden her in her cruel course. This present horror at her feet, this heart breaking before her eyes, effaced for once the memory of the past. She shuddered to behold the bitterness of death. Bending over him she cried hurriedly in his ear, 'Alan, it shall not be what you fear.'

He lifted up his head to look at her. Hearing, perhaps, was growing dull, but he knew she had spoken, if he did not know what she said.

'Take courage,' she said then, more distinctly, 'nobody shall hurt your life.'

Then a sudden impulse, amazement or even perhaps fear of what she had done, seized her. She rose up hastily and fled.

So she vanished from his sight for ever, but he knew she had withdrawn her vengeance, and that in the last hour of his life, that life she vainly thought it depended upon her to extend, he was forgiven. Surely in that draught of despair and death which he had yet to drink there mingled now a few less bitter drops. And now, in his last cry to God, some faint thanksgiving might be mixed with agony and tears.

No one came again into that dim room. Silence fell upon the house, and the last quarter before eleven had struck. The closing ears heard it, the failing strength was roused to meet that death from which Catherine's forgiveness could not save.

Slowly, with many pauses, those limbs faint, now with death, were trailed along the corridor, faltering through weakness rather than through fear. The clear anticipation that had been so full of dread was past. The resolve to keep his appointment with Ragagni seemed to have detached itself from all other operations of the mind, remaining like an instinct,

only to be extinguished when life itself went out, though consciousness and thought were almost gone.

The room was empty, though the candles were alight. He sank down wearily in his accustomed chair. He had done everything. There remained only that he should die.

He knew no terror during that pause of awful waiting. The sensitive nerves, the imagination strong to foresee suffering, were growing irresponsive now and dull. Conscious thought was over. Perhaps there was a feeling of fatigue, a sense of bodily pain. Perhaps there was for a little while some dim, peaceful recollection of May's love, and of the days when Catherine was kind. Such calm memories return sometimes in the last moments of a life that has for years been dark. Then came the point at which they also faded from the failing brain, and vitality became physical alone.

When Ragagni, bending over him, looked into Alan Valery's eyes—if they still saw, they could no longer recognise. No last flash of sullenness and hate showed consciousness that his enemy was near. An instant afterwards the final shadows fell upon their lids. The pulse stopped, the sick heart ceased its heavy

and irregular beat. From all earthly retribution the criminal had escaped. Another and a mightier hand had summoned Alan Valery from human vengeance to the judgment seat of God.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN the early hours of the morning there was a strange stir at Bellair. Shocked faces peered curiously through the study door, eager and excited whispering ran from room to room. During the night death had come noiselessly into the house. A short life, to all who watched its course, mysterious, inglorious, and unhappy, had found in solitude its sudden and mysterious close.

At the very last that close must have been peaceful. Sullenness was lifted from the young and solemn brows, the glare of expectation had faded from the quiet eyes, sadness was no more written round the pale set lips. Gentleness and youth, and a strange beauty, had returned to Alan Valery's face, when they found him, in the warm summer morning, looking like one who through great weariness had fallen asleep.

A feeling of consternation, not untinged with self-reproach, entered the hearts that had either been indifferent or steeled against him hitherto. The weakness that had been stigmatised as indolence, a visible, though rarely spoken of decline, referred to guilty conscience, or a nervous imagination, had all the time been sapping away life itself. The unnoticed pain had been the symptom of a deadly disease.

There was an unavowed and startled consciousness that Alan's last year had been, on the whole, lonely, neglected, as well as righteously unhappy, finding in the final agony, unseen, unsoothed, its too appropriate end.

Philip Lucas and Catherine gazed at each other with half-remorseful glances over Alan's dead body. His illness had been evident the night before, and yet they had done nothing for him. Grief was impossible, but over and above the dull pain of an unexpected shock, a feeling of guilt made heavy both their hearts.

'I did not think he was dying,' Catherine murmured with hushed accents, standing beside the hunted criminal upon whom God's sentence was already passed.

‘I did not think,’ said Philip, ‘that he would die so soon.’

Death is most dark, and most repulsive, when there are no tears for the dead. There could be no weeping over Alan Valery at Bellair. The new-made widow turned away surprised, awed, a little self-reproachful, but with dry eyes.

‘It is best so,’ she said to Philip. ‘Notwithstanding what occurred last night, there would have been difficulties—complications.’

‘Much the best,’ he answered. He was more capable of compassion than was she, but this ending, sad though it was, and drearily alone, severed many tangled threads, cut short all embarrassment between principle and feeling, abrogated some painful duties, and had probably saved the unfortunate who was gone from greater suffering and shame.

‘God is very merciful,’ said Catherine, looking up doubtfully into her cousin’s eyes. Almost as she spoke, she shivered with a recollection of the night before.

‘He did not meet with much mercy here,’ said Philip Lucas in a low voice.

For May’s sake, if for no other reason, Philip would have liked to recal the previous evening, that he might do somewhat differently

from that which he had done. Yet he had not desired to be unmerciful. He had thought Alan Valery near his death, but not so near. Knowing now that those were mortal agonies which he had witnessed, he wished he had not sat by in appearance, even more than in reality, so utterly unmoved.

May's grief was a painful anticipation. She would have tears enough for the wretched lad whose death, had it only been somewhat different in the manner of it, would have brought unmitigated relief to all.

Catherine, however, thinking of her and of her probable tears, was almost glad that May, at any rate, would have some to shed. She could not weep for her miserable young husband. There was a certain awfulness about his fate that chilled, but personal sorrow she had none.

Her softest feeling in these first moments of her freedom, was that of satisfaction that she had relented from her vengeance against him a few hours before he died. But she felt as if there should be somebody to weep. At least this death, as yet not only unlamented, but matter of deep though grave and unexpressed rejoicing, was thereby invested with a sorrow and desolation more

oppressive than any usual accompaniments of sobs and sighs.

‘You must go down and fetch May,’ she said, dropping wearily upon the sofa in the morning room. ‘I don’t think she was at all prepared for such a shock, but of course it will be her first wish to come.’

‘I had better go down to the poor child at once,’ said Philip.

‘I shouldn’t wonder if she hears it before you get there. It will very soon be known that the medical man has been summoned here, and why!’

‘God forbid!’ he answered. ‘I wouldn’t for a kingdom have my little girl hear it from the Manns first of all!’

But it was still early, and of this new sorrow May knew nothing yet. The breakfast hour was a late one at the Manns, so that they probably were still completing their night’s rest when Philip reached the house. But looking up at May’s window he perceived that it was open and the curtains already drawn aside.

A servant on her knees upon the doorstep, beside a pail of water, stared in amazement as Philip asked for May. The transference of Miss Valery’s affections from him to Ragagni

had been matter of much comment in her master's house. Philip Lucas, unexpected and inadmissible at any hour, was certainly a singular visitor at half-past eight o'clock in the morning.

'Miss May ain't down yet, sir. I don't know as she's left her room at all.'

Philip stepped over the bucket into the hall, opening the first door he came to, which, as it happened, was that of Captain Mann's peculiar sanctum.

'Look here,' he said, as the girl followed in consternation and surprise, drawing towards him an inkstand and writing case that stood upon the table, 'you must ask Miss Valery to come down as soon as she possibly can. I see you have heard nothing about it. But you must tell her there is something the matter at home. You shall carry this to her in a moment.'

He took a bit of paper, and wrote hurriedly,

'DEAR MAY—You are wanted at Bellair—come as quickly as you can.'

P. L.'

'Give her that,' he said, folding it in haste. 'And say that I'm waiting.'

His waiting was not long before, as he stood

holding the door in his hand in impatient suspense, he heard the rustle of May's dress upon the stair—her long dresses had always a peculiar sweep, at any rate for him—and went out into the hall. Seeing him, she stopped short upon the lowest step.

‘What is it?’ she said, breathlessly.

Her thoughts had fastened upon the discovery of Alan's secret as the probable cause of this strange summons, and in the agitation of that fear his presence even, whose nearness only had thrown her yesterday into an agony of longing, became a matter of secondary consideration.

‘O Philip! has anything happened?’

As he drew her without speaking into the room, he felt her fingers tighten upon his hand like the grasp of one in pain. At such a moment no sense of disappointment was admissible, because she had no especial thought for him. He only grieved over the trouble he could not avert from his poor little weak May.

‘Alan has not been well,’ he said, looking at her with anxious tenderness.

Her colour changed. For an instant there was a look of almost ease. Then she seemed to perceive that everything—perhaps the worst—

was not yet told. Her hold relaxed feebly, and she sat down.

‘Since when?’

‘Since last night,’ said Philip.

She put her hands over her face. There was nothing in the words to cause extreme alarm, but they derived unnatural significance from the speaker’s look and tone.

‘O Philip, not *very* ill?’ she cried at last beseechingly, as if the degree of Alan’s sickness depended upon the answer he might choose to give.

‘He was very ill, dear May.’

‘Was?’ May repeated the word doubtfully. Lifting her head, her eyes sought Philip’s face. ‘He is not better?’

‘God grant that it may be better for him as it is,’ said Philip. More confidently of Alan Valery’s hereafter he dared not speak.

He had said enough. He could almost see her tremble and grow cold. She sat frozen, without speech or movement.

‘We found him looking very calm and still,’ Philip went on more easily, perceiving her to have in measure understood. ‘I’m afraid there was some suffering first, but to all appearances the end was free from violent pain.’

With a long shiver as she listened, May's tears gathered and began to fall.

'Who was with him?'

'No one was with him. He died in the night—in the study.'

'All alone?' said May, a sort of spasm breaking in upon her voice.

The silence answered her.

'O, I wish I had been with him!'

It was a sorrow which Philip scarce knew how to console by words. It was hard to him to see her grief, and he had armed himself with utmost patience to support what he could not understand or stay. But he wished, not unnaturally, that some perception of the one blessed consequence of her brother's death, removing all necessity to complete the sacrifice of both their feelings, for Alan's sake begun, would dawn upon her mind, bringing some light to the darkness of her trouble.

There had been from the first, indeed, an entire return to her old ways with him—to an unrestrained and trusting manner. But, apparently, it was rather the unconscious result of agitation, overthrowing all barriers either of resolution or of form, than the fruit of real conviction that between her and her lover consideration for Alan's safety no longer stood.

‘Look to the better side of things, my darling,’ he said at last, with a kind of comforting reproof.

‘I see that he is perhaps saved from much.’ Then she looked up at him with a sudden painful start. She was not aware how much he knew, nor had realised as yet that no knowledge of his secret could injure Alan any more.

‘My dear little girl, my own dear May, we know it also.’

‘*Well*’

‘Catherine and I.’

‘O yes, she has guessed it,’ May burst forth with passionate entreaty, ‘and she is trying to find everything out. Philip, don’t tell her, for my sake, if you love me the least, least little bit! If you care for me at all.’

He drew her towards him, with a half articulated exclamation of compassion.

‘Hush, dear, you forget your brother is now beyond the power of man.’

It seemed for a moment as if she stood trying to receive the idea, but incapable of doing so. At length she drew a long, sighing breath. There was relief in it, and yet to hear it would have pierced the heart of any one who loved her.

‘Thank God!’ she said at last, and speaking not at all to Philip. ‘Dear, dear Alan, you are safe!’

But the thankfulness was very bitter then, with the knowledge of his lonely death so new. She hid her face upon the supporting arms and wept afresh.

Philip was earnestly anxious to divert her mind from the one cruel thought of Alan’s death to the re-opening prospect of that future which she had for his sake given up.

‘You saw Ragagni yesterday?’ he asked, speaking softly; the presence of May’s grief and weakness took all the roughness from his voice.

She answered, as if she wondered how at such a moment he could introduce Ragagni’s name, with a manifest and weary exercise of forbearance, ‘No—’

‘He never came near you?’

She started at the earnestness of that repeated question with a painful animation. ‘Was he ill then?’

‘Ragagni is gone!’ said Philip. ‘He said, I believe, that he should see you in the afternoon, to take his leave. He is gone to Italy.’

Finding that the supposed visit had not

in any way been connected with Alan's illness, she fell back into indifference.

'He will come again,' she said hopelessly.

'It is most unlikely. But he could not hurt you now if he did.'

'No,' said May. She spoke as if in submission to Philip's judgment, rather than through any perception of her own.

'You hated him, did you not?' He felt an irrepressible longing to win expression of her terror and abhorrence, unreasonably enough assured of it as he already was.

She shivered a little in his arms. An instant afterwards a sense of deliverance seemed to come to her relief. She looked up at him, a rapture of thankfulness displacing for a moment the paleness of her face.

'God be praised!' said Philip to himself, welcoming the blessed change.

'O Philip! it has been so dreadful!'

'I know it has been. Poor little tender victim! It is all past now!'

'I couldn't tell you, because of what you used to say about—I thought you would be against him, and at first he didn't know what I was doing.' Then there broke in suddenly a piteous cry—'Philip, I want to go to him—I

want to see him. Nobody cares about him but me!’

‘I will take you presently, when you’re better.’

He spoke like one endeavouring to soothe a child. He always did treat her like a child, she was so many years younger than he, and found her generally obedient. But her acquiescence scarcely was so ready now.

‘O, Philip, let me go to him!’ she cried, after a few minutes, as if in detaining her there he did her wrong. ‘Nobody cares about poor Alan at Bellair!’ she urged.

Neither the occasion, nor yet Philip’s heart, admitted then of unyielding authority. It was true that she could do no good, but her pleading was so bitterly in earnest, it was so true that at that moment the newly dead was lying unlamented and alone. He let her go to get herself ready, the more willingly that he thought he heard afar the captain’s ponderous footfall. The alarm was false, he found, when May had left him, so he wrote a note for the captain’s information. This he desired the servant to take to him at once, saying at the same time that young Mr. Valery was dead.

Then when May, whose return had been delayed by a brief interview with Mrs. Mann,

came down, he took her back with him. She preferred walking, and at that hour there was little risk of meeting acquaintances on the road.

He remembered as they went silently along, how once before he had summoned her in an hour of death and mourning—a sort of seed from which this plant of present trouble might be said in measure to have sprung—early one August morning to Bellair.

CHAPTER XX.

It was not till some days after the funeral when May, shrinking at once from Catherine and Bellair, was once more at the Manns', that Alan Valery's last letter came into his sister's hands.

By that time the bitter sense of thankfulness that had struggled with even her first grief was growing stronger, perception of the possible danger, disgrace, and sorrow he had escaped, becoming with reflection more distinct. When she had read through the last lines his hand had traced, learning therefrom the hopeless bondage, the hideous anticipation of the previous year, May bowed her head, with something more than resignation, comparing the real with the expected end.

'It had been for some time in my mind,' said Alan's letter, 'that you ought to know the truth about my death. I feared it might

trouble your loving heart when you should afterwards think of me, as I know you will, to believe I had ventured to cut short the life which God had given, and would not withdraw, however miserable it might have been. But I had no settled resolution to make you acquainted with the real history of to-night till yesterday, when in our last hour together I perceived your suspicion that I knew what sacrifice you had resolved to make for me.

‘I saw, then, that you guessed my knowledge, and of course, judging by my behaviour, took it for granted that I acquiesced. And I saw then, dear May, with infinite pain, knowing that I looked upon you for the last time, the sad wonder which you felt, quite apart from all reluctance on your part, at finding I could be content to let you suffer so for me. Such wonder you could not but feel. Nor could it fail to chill your manner, in what, unconsciously to you, was the last farewell that to each other you or I should ever speak.

‘Dear May, absolve me now from that charge, which, though unspoken, unacknowledged, perhaps, even to yourself, your heart made against me then. Never for a minute

did I inwardly consent to the destruction of your love and hope.

‘I believe I never should have consented, even had my life been purchaseable at such cost. At the same time I was not put to the test. Ragagni’s vengeance is a passion far too fierce, and too exacting, to give up its demands for love. Moreover, there is nothing in him which could feel love for such as you. Had I suffered, and circumstances permitted, your marriage with him, I felt convinced, I should have still died in the same manner as I am about to die to-night.

‘The only difference, therefore, in my fate, which my determination not to permit your sacrifice would have made, would have been to substitute public execution for secret murder. It became necessary that I should give myself up. This step I should have taken immediately, but for one thing. Ragagni was proceeding slowly, and my death I have lately become aware is imminent from disease. I believed, and still believe the end to be inevitably near at hand, quite apart from the probability of a violent death.

‘Dear May, if it had pleased God that I should die a natural death, it would have spared you much to which by the confession

of Geronimo Varese's fate, you would have been exposed. For this reason I did nothing decisive, and intended to delay, as long as such a course was safe for you. Whether I could have held out after the insight I had yesterday into your sorrow, I do not know. But when I sat by, letting you weep unconsoled, I knew that in two days' time you would find yourself perfectly free from all necessity to impose such martyrdom upon yourself. I had already then received my sentence, and been made aware at the same time that Ragagni has no choice but to give up all thoughts of making you his wife, and start for Italy, as soon as his business with me shall be done.

'I should like you to let Catherine know what I have told you here. I can send her no message; she would not believe or care to hear how well I loved her to the last. Of course you will explain everything to Philip Lucas, that he may see your conduct in its proper light. I hope he will be tender to you, little girl, and wise, not inflicting on himself and you, because of what I did, a separation that is bitter evidently to both.

'Dear May, if there should be any rest with God for such sinful sufferers as I, the time

may come when I shall look again upon your face. Your love has been a consolation in hours that were very dark. You alone will ever care to hope that I may be forgiven, and that our parting may not be eternal after all. Give me your full forgiveness, my dear true sister, and may God reward you for your love.'

Those were Alan Valery's last words, which perhaps he might have found it comforting to write, lingering on the recollection of that love which had ever proved so faithful and so fond.

After a time they brought a strange and awful comfort also to May's grief. She could be thankful that the end had been so different from that in expectation of which her brother wrote. The parting moments of that brief but troubled life had assuredly been calm. She could not think otherwise, who had hung long in love and tears over the still face, from which all passion and all pain had passed. In his death great mercy had been shown, a mercy which she took as earnest of greater still, feeling assured in her own heart of ultimate repose for that beloved but stained and stricken soul.

Catherine and Philip were made acquainted with that letter. May gave it into Philip's

hands, who in his turn told his cousin its contents. Catherine listened with a shiver, but without speaking, to the end. In what way the tale affected her, or whether it affected her at all, she never said anything to show. Perhaps she felt when it was read, that it was a dark page in her history that those last words of Alan Valery's closed.

At the time she was already deep in hasty preparations to leave Bellair. She was going back to Italy, to the place where she had spent her youth with that ill-fated lover whose memory still made a soft spot in a fierce, ungentle heart. Before autumn had become winter she was gone, and the great melancholy house shut up. No one wandered any more among the fading glories of the gardens, or sought from wind or sun the shelter of the laurel hedge. There were eyes that could never without a pang, never for a long while without tears, behold, even from a distance, the long sombre frontage that looked down solemnly on Lynnwater and the sea.

During the winter May Valery continued at the Manns'. The old couple seemed to be a good deal subdued by the unceremonious departure of Ragagni. As it could never be thoroughly explained to them, and was a subject to which they themselves found it un-

pleasant to refer, his hasty flight remained an irritating mystery to their minds.

Opposition to Philip Lucas could be but feeble any more. Whatever else was or was not plain, it was as clear even to their vision that May had lately suffered much, as that some unmentionable tragedy was connected with Alan Valery's name. It was never to be heard either from Philip's lips or May's.

Quiet and still for May were those short winter days. A sort of exhausted peacefulness possessed her, such as could only follow upon great pain. Philip's society and marvellous gentleness gave, apparently, the only living brightness to her life. In the spring, however, a summons from Mrs. Valery took him away from Lynnwater for a time.

With a strange retributive similarity to her husband's fate, the consumptive tendency, of which others had made light, had developed, she wrote, into confirmed disease. The end by which the lives of all her family had been cut short was drawing near to her, undelayed by the soft climate of the country she had loved to call her own. In this conviction, she desired to see her cousin, and to commend personally to his care the sole offspring of her fatal marriage.

Perhaps even then, though starting instantly at her request, Philip Lucas had little or no real belief in the necessity for speed. It was probably one of Catherine's fancies, as of old. At the same time, he had been only too recently warned against slighting as imagination what might prove reality at last, to his life-long regret. He parted from May reluctantly, and went.

He was glad afterwards that he could not reproach himself with any delay. When he saw Catherine, the end was already come, and over her features had passed something of that mysterious change which had restored peace and beauty to Alan's face in death. That weary, marred, and disappointed life had burned itself out; and, so far as kindred were concerned, alone. The fierce heart was cold; the troubled, wayward spirit sought no longer to avenge its wrongs.

Philip's arrival availed only to do honour to the dead. After that burial in strange earth was over, he set out at once for Lynnwater again. He had become before acquainted with the route he had to traverse on his return, and so had little temptation to linger on his way. He was not destined, however, to accomplish his journey altogether without delay.

One night, entering a small town through which he had to pass, he was roused from such sleep as, in the jolting vehicle he occupied, could be obtained, by a sudden outcry in the narrow street.

Probably his slumber had been light, as the cry was only uttered once, and even that once was scarcely very loud. Nevertheless, it thoroughly disturbed him; and, under the idea that there had been an accident, he called to the driver to inquire what had occurred. A man, in the dark corner of the street they had just passed, had been attacked by some one who had a grudge against him and stabbed.

There was no crowd. The inclination of the few passers by was, evidently, rather to depart in haste lest they should be involved in inconvenience by the possession of the slightest knowledge of the affair.

Philip Lucas stopped the carriage, somewhat against the will of the conductor, and got out.

The black shadow of a projecting portico, rendered it impossible to discover whether the victim were alive or dead. The moon was shining in the middle of the street, however, and Philip, who was accompanied by one of Catherine's late servants, desirous to return to England, had the wounded man

carried out of the dim corner in which he had been struck down.

The moonlight fell upon a dark, solemn face—the face of a man no longer young; with features strongly marked, an expression serious and stern, that had now the added awfulness of death. This dark, foreign face, lying dead on the pavement of a foreign town, was strangely familiar to the English eyes beholding it with surprised and eager gaze. A whole history of sin and suffering returned to Philip's mind, at sight of those severe and gloomy brows. The slain man was Catherine's cousin Ragagni.

Before Mr. Lucas resumed his homeward journey, it had been reported, how truly he could not tell, that the assassination represented the vengeance of a political association of which the victim was supposed to be a faithless member. The all-devouring deity of Ragagni's worship had at last required the immolation of its devotee.

Some months later, when Philip had accomplished his long-cherished aim, and May was sitting, as once long ago, in the old-fashioned window-seat at Forelands, like a pale bud among the rich red roses, he told her how he had seen Ragagni die.

'The secret, therefore,' he said, 'is now entirely our own. No one can henceforward trouble us, nor is there any danger of this fatal history being communicated to your brother's child. May, dearest, so far as you can ever forget your sorrow, it is at an end.'

It might not be forgotten—that sad knowledge acquired through so much pain. But all wounds that are not mortal heal over and lose their tenderness in time. May, in her new home, might yet enjoy a future that should be calm and bright, finding in Philip Lucas a strength as strong, a love more gentle, than she had ever thought to find, and in the little dark-headed stranger that grew up among her own yellow-haired offspring, she had yet a living object for that faithful, indestructible affection that had held by Alan Valery to the last.

THE END.

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